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**NODE:**

**“New feminist materialism:  
engendering an  
ethic-onto-epistemological  
methodology”**



Universitat Oberta  
de Catalunya

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## INTRODUCTION

## New feminist materialism: engendering an ethic-onto- epistemological methodology

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This special issue has been mostly based on communications presented at the Fifth New Materialist Conference on 25-26 September 2014 in Barcelona. Hosted by the Interdisciplinary Internet Institute attached to the Open University of Catalonia, this conference was also the kick-off event for ISCH Cost Action IS1307 on “New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on How Matter Comes to Matter”, organized by the GENTIC research group in collaboration with several European universities and partially funded by the Spanish Women’s Institute in order to highlight (in) visible structural oppressions. The September conference, titled “New Materialist Methodologies: Gender, Politics, the Digital”, was highly productive in terms of the intellectual contribution of ideas and content-wise papers on the subject of gender, methodologies, politics and digital cultures from a new-materialist framework. The articles in this issue constitute a sample of very insightful approaches coming from various areas within the conference themes.

New materialism is a transversal approach still in the making but becoming increasingly consolidated as demonstrated by the support of the European Union and of the eighty participants in the September conference. Nevertheless, the conference highlighted several issues as still works in progress that need to be further explored. One of these issues is the elaboration of new materialist

methodology/methodologies. Indeed, in order to be able to engender critical interventions in oppressive phenomena, a methodological plan remains a *sine qua non* condition.

As her methodological approach, Felicity Colman gives a more general account of the image and marks gender as a differential transformation for political recognition of the subject. That is, she claims that image is a conditional and conditioning process that may infer political territories in which racial and gendered discourses become simultaneously disruptive and disrupting. In Krizia Nardini’s words, they *become otherwise*, and, as Colman shows, gendered images are one possible approach to exploring social injustices permeating contemporary society. This “ethic-onto-epistemological” (Barad, 2007) methodology, at least for the moment, is becoming a self-transforming genealogy that affirmatively looks into the entanglement between past, present and future; this is because it produces “diffractive readings” (van der Tuin, 2011a) of contemporary and past theories (as Krizia Nardini demonstrates) but with a radical intervention in oppressive systems – that is, “always already” processual, in the making, with and within the future.

Arnette Arlande describes a methodological plan as an entanglement of momentarily accountable intra-actions. By

introducing performative cuts in an artistic project, Arlande shows how art is a self-transforming political matter. However, precisely what is the political matter in new materialism or how new materialism becomes accountable politically is another issue that remains a work in process. In her paper, Hanna Meissner affirms that much more work needs to be done in the theorization of new materialism, especially regarding its nature as a perspective or a common ground and the question of politics. So far, we are tempted to say that new materialism can function as both: a movement that breaks through traditional conceptualizations of epistemologies and a common ground from which phenomena can be analysed. For feminist theory, finding a plural common ground that alters hegemonic power has always been paramount. Already in the 1980s, Lucy Irigaray (1985) prompted feminists to “think differently” and “find a language of their own”. The articles presented here enact precisely this project by touching upon different areas of knowledge such as art, politics and philosophy. Thus, automatically we reformulate once again – and reiteratively work through – new materialism(s) when we discuss (new) feminist materialism – the specific focus of this issue. Inevitably, in talking about feminism(s), two particular dimensions occupy the front stage: gender and politics.

Reflecting upon “feminist collective” identity/identities and a “minimal notion of female essences”, Franciska Aigner and Katja Čičigoj propose Barad’s “violent” cuts as a way of finding a political ground for feminism. In a similar vein, Signe Gaamelgard’s paper aims at finding Ranciere’s radical democracy with/within Barad’s cuts in order to produce acts of resistance.

With this special issue, we aim to critically engage with some of the conversations produced with/within the September conference

in order to engender future debates. By contributing – through the continuum between real and virtual – to the conceptualization of key new feminist materialism terms such as “politics”, “methodology” and “gender”, we want to produce a *qualitative leap into the future of feminism(s)* (van der Tuin, 2011b). We aim to pursue a review of the ethics of feminist politics and theory by pushing at the self-transformative nature of matter at its extreme, while situating ourselves as always already political subjects. We aim to engage with –while seeking possibilities for transformation of – oppressed and oppressing conditions of life in the intra-action of past, present and future feminist realities.

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Her doctoral thesis (defended on the December, 2014), on women's literature and social networking sites, focuses especially on the contemporary author Toni Morrison and her official Facebook page. The object of the thesis, which applies a diffractive methodology, is to explore the shifts produced in communication between readers and authors from a feminist perspective when tackling issues concerning gender, politics and language. She is currently participating in the management committee of ISCH Cost Action IS1307 on "New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on How Matter Comes to Matter" and is a board member of the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation (ATGENDER). She has published several articles and book reviews in journals like *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *NORAL: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender research*, among others.

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## ARTICLE

**NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”****Digital Feminicity: Predication and Measurement, Materialist Informatics and Images****Felicity Colman**

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**Abstract**

“Feminicity” is the term for a predicate register that enables feminist work be accounted for as relational “active-points” (as an alternative formulation to standpoints) that collectively can be seen through what they have achieved. But going further, it marks where those active-points contribute to the dynamic field of feminist epistemologies and where change occurs. This article contributes to my larger project’s discussion of this concept. Broadly, feminicity argues that the active-points of feminist practices (practical and conceptual) need to be understood within their situated fields as materialist informatics. In the digital era, examples of the affects of digital feminicity are as identified in works such as those by Wajcman (1991; 2004); Haraway (1993; Nakamura, 2003), Hayles (1993; 2012), VNSMatrix (1991), Adam (1998), Plant (1998). Collectively, such authors and artists opened a creative, and sometimes radical discourse of the digital field as multidirectional, multidimensional, multitemporal platform of “gender actions”. Taken as a predicated field (using Gottlob Frege’s (1964) sense of the term “predicate”), this work contributes to the feminist materialist reappraisal of feminist epistemology (cf. Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Van Der Tuin, 2014), and larger radical feminist deconstructive projects (Malabou, 2011; Fraser, 2013). Thus conceived, the genealogy of digital feminicity problematizes the monopolitical terms of feminism in its collation of actions, enabling a re-situation of feminist practices as positive material interventions and expressions of the ontological constitution of the political sphere. Feminicity does not propose a chronological account of the active-points, but processually and systemically addresses the terms of generational epistemological political change (Olkowski, 1999; Van Der Tuin 2014). This article describes the ways in which a materialist constructed register – “feminicity” – can be used to think about encounters between the domains of gender, politics and technology, as manifested by materialist informatics. For reasons of brevity, this article focuses on just two aspects of feminicity: the terms of predication of the female as gendered, and the issue of the image, as digital informatics, comprised of activity-points of feminist practice. Consequently, these are measurable and offer practical resources for the general problem of gendering politics that operate in governance, resource distribution and a



non-equal opportunity social/cultural power structure, under which minorities are disadvantaged. Feminist practice here refers to forms produced through feminist activities, ie, forms generated through relations with the matter of life through specific modalities of needs-based practices (inclusive of intuition, compulsion, capitalist-driven practices of utility, theory and art).

### Keywords

feminicity, feminism, epistemology, technology, digital, materialism

## *Feminidad digital: predicación y medida, informática materialista e imágenes*

### Resumen

«Feminidad» es el término correspondiente a un registro predicado que permite describir la obra feminista como «puntos activos» relacionales (como una alternativa a puntos de vista), que colectivamente pueden considerarse a través de lo que han conseguido. Pero yendo más allá, señala en qué contribuyen esos puntos activos en el campo dinámico de las epistemologías feministas, y dónde se produce el cambio. Este artículo forma parte de mi proyecto más amplio dedicado a examinar el concepto de feminidad. En líneas generales, la feminidad afirma que los puntos activos de las prácticas feministas (tanto prácticos como conceptuales) han de entenderse en sus campos situados como la informática materialista. En la era digital, se identifican ejemplos de los efectos de la feminidad digital en obras como las de Wajcman (1991, 2004); Haraway (1993), Nakamura (2003), Hayles (1993, 2012), VNSMatrix (1991), Adam (1998) y Plant (1998). De forma colectiva, estas artistas y autoras generaron un discurso creativo y a veces radical sobre el campo digital, visto como plataforma multitemporal, multidireccional y multidimensional de «acciones de género». Tomado como campo predicado (en base al sentido que Gottlob Frege (1964) otorgó al término «predicado»), este trabajo contribuye a la revalorización de la epistemología feminista materialista (Alaimo y Hekman, 2008; Van Der Tuin, 2014), y a proyectos de deconstrucción feminista radical más amplios (Malabou, 2011; Fraser, 2013). Concebido de ese modo, la genealogía de la feminidad digital pretende problematizar los términos monopolíticos del feminismo al contrastar acciones, así como reubicar las prácticas feministas como intervenciones y expresiones materiales positivas de la constitución ontológica de la esfera política. La feminidad no propone un recorrido cronológico por los puntos activos, sino que aborda, de manera procesual y sistemática, los términos del cambio político epistemológico generacional (Olkowski, 1999). Este artículo describe de qué maneras puede emplearse un registro materialista construido —el de la «feminidad»— para pensar en los encuentros entre el género, la política y la tecnología (analógica, digital, biológica), tal y como se manifiestan en la informática materialista. Para no extenderse en exceso, este artículo se concentra en dos aspectos de la feminidad: los términos de predicación de lo femenino entendido como género, y el tema de la imagen como informática digital, formada por puntos de actividad de la práctica feminista. En consecuencia, se trata de aspectos mesurables que ofrecen recursos prácticos para el problema general de las políticas de género que se ejecutan en el gobierno, la distribución de recursos y la desigualdad de oportunidades en la estructura de poder socio-cultural, en la que las minorías están en desventaja. En este artículo, la práctica feminista remite a formas producidas por actividades feministas, es decir, formas generadas por las relaciones con la materia de la vida a través de modalidades específicas de prácticas basadas en necesidades (que incluyen la intuición, la compulsión, las prácticas de utilidad promovidas por el capitalismo, la teoría y el arte).

### Palabras clave

feminidad, feminismo, epistemología, tecnología, digital, materialismo

The rethinking of the work of the second-wave feminists through the critical methodologies offered by appraisals of feminist genealogies (Adkins, 2004; Burchill, 2006; Van Der Tuin, 2014), and feminist new materialist theories (Braidotti, 2006; Coole and Frost, 2010) has now begun in earnest. These approaches are dilating our understanding of the specific trajectories of the technical work of feminists and their various methodologies. Yet the voices of feminists are still all too often absent or marginal from philosophical, theoretical, technological, media, and artistic debates, aside from their place as a token “other voice”. Feminism and the feminine remain as problematic terms, as theorists continue to address “feminism”, which, per se, offers a “paradoxical” position (Thiele, 2014), while the agency of the “feminine”, as Louise Burchill argues, is limited by its philosophical traditions in so far as its use can often only be understood as either a “conceptual persona or a schema” (Burchill 2006, p. 85). Wherever and whenever a feminist strategy has identified, intervened, and offered an analysis of the singularity of the politically gendered body, situating it within its relational, multi-planar, materially constituted world is an example of what I refer to as a feminist active-point and is evidence of a change enabler that I call an action of feminicity. This article first sketches out some of the ideas underlying this concept, then considers how feminicity can assist in thinking through the image, taking the term “image” to be a mode of communication used in the digital field of 1990-2015, a period that remains deeply contested by feminist theory for its gendering effects.

The image is here understood as a manifest expression of a political time and as an intensive experiential moment that has shaped a significant discourse of gendered technology; what Judy Wacjman describes as a ‘technopower’ that is ‘enacted materially’ (Wacjman 2004, p. 54). For feminist thinking and practice, the image is not simply a matter of “representation”. Rather, the image is to be understood in its Bergsonian sense, as an aggregated concept and as a material thing that is the result of a series of relational positions, the centre of which is a body. The image both stages and acts as a catalyser of the technologies that produce, direct, and manage the aggregated image; as a body within capital. In its coming into being, the image provides a focus for understanding the micro-political dimensions of the construction of different realities and the production of particular political forms of identity and territories, variously called ontology or aesthetics but which, in the digital era, exist as materialist informatics.

One of the methodological issues faced when writing about a movement in things – materials, their uses, ideas, conditions, duration, etc. – is the dilemma of how to measure the notions of change, difference and relationality without smoothing the movement into an historically containable/manageable position. In empirical descriptions, we flatten and, in theoretical speculation (however creative the terms may be), we exclude or misinterpret the change in, and of, concepts and objects of enquiry. In mapping we measure, so any movement is thus positioned within a certain trajectory or

field that locates itself through some previously known link, however tenuous. Yet without taxonomic measurement, historicizing accounts that indicate where change has occurred, unorthodox methods or modes and different ways of approaching and conceiving of the world, we remain bound to the same routine system, cycles and modes of production. Yet to collect all together in the current system of capitalism is to present everything as a coherent consumable. Is nothing outside this system? No, of course, there remain things unmeasured by the current, changing modes of capital accumulation. For any creative, remotely or staunchly anarchic, alternative or minor thinker, there are dangers and failures inherent in the analysis of some or all activities. In accounting, we offer our relational abilities of joining together and thus creating new forms and modes of equation. Ideas and experiential knowledge can transform into pipeline funds that bankroll other forms of profit-making activity (the clear aim of all capitalist systems), rather than act as springboards to other systems of living. So, we do not offer up all that could be measured; rather, we withhold ideas, we remain silent about experiences and we keep our thoughts to ourselves. We do not want to be measured by this system. Yet – in offering a collective position, a joining together of related ideas, experiences and thoughts and turning them into actions, and a manifestation of desire for real change – a movement gains a collective form and is catalysed by, and answers to, variations on a collective name. A singular name instantly holds historicity. That is unavoidable, although it provides a collective field and holds a momentary materiality, a form, an idea, a complex temporally specific narrative. Sometimes that field is aggregated, escalated into a longer collective, even a “grand narrative”. But nothing remains in stasis, everything is subject to temporal flux, states of transition and change. It is *how* the collectively named field is employed, and actioned, that provokes the question of where and how its technical and organic motility manifests change, producing shifts in meaning. Change is an organic concept, identified by humans through shifts in form, experiential factors, degrees of independence or symbiosis, with its effects felt through different durational cycles. Change is not discreet, but relationally asymmetric, multifunctional and multidimensional in terms of speed, time, form and the creation of simple and or complex vectorial fields that any given object establishes or dissipates. Knowledge fields, or epistemic regimes (in the Foucaultian sense), work then through a series of durational cycles, propelled by temporal and spatial catalysers, a range of schematic filters (theoretical, conceptual, practical, biological and sovereign [national] models) and a range of layered platforms (epistemological directors of technology, economic systems, etc.), which enable the emergence of transitional forms and transformations of materialized and withheld forms.

The twentieth century witnessed two changes that historically manifested themselves at quite different speeds and durational cycles but which profoundly altered the global landscape. Across micro- and macro-operations, their relational fields pulled together. The fields

are the feminist and the digital fields, each of which manifests quite different forms of change. Traversing the same platforms, filters and catalysers, the combined outcomes have enabled all kinds of practices and ways of thinking that materially register a temporal and spatial difference to previous modes and forms. From the mid-nineteenth century, printing presses (an analog technological platform) facilitated the spread of the suffrage word (as a schematic filter). At the end of the twentieth century, broader technological changes (military and functional catalysers) emerged as digital forms. The epistemic exchange of information concerning issues identified by feminists radically changed through the interaction of the human body (as catalyser, filter and technology) with digital platforms. Consider how reproductive technologies (information, biological control and facilitation) contribute to the decrease in the global birth rate (a quantitative transitional filter) of humans (as ecological platforms). It is in the manner of its configuration of informatics coding and the subsequent exchange and material production that a different or new form can be perceived to emerge.

Through digital platforms, an awareness of the breadth of feminist-specific positions have redirected and altered the generalizations that proclaim categories of race, gender, culture, feminism, and speciesism, into an awareness of the iniquitous states of gendered cultural and social hierarchies in operation. Gendered structures are enforced in law, education, the sciences and social value technology systems, algorithmically continuing the millennia of ingrained patriarchal and ethnically determining structures that control the direction of hierarchically distributed power relations between genders (see Mies, 1998). As all revolutionary histories demonstrate, political regulations are adept at abstracting processes and using any potentially reorienting paradigmatic possibilities against the revolutionary turn. Despite digital facilitation of knowledge of the multiple positive contributions made by feminist work to broader society, “feminism” per se is continuously reinscribed as a dogmatic product, at which point it loses its affective processual potential to enact a transformational shift; hence, change may take place in a negative space. What if we started to tabulate these activities; production, change, intervention? What if we registered each and every action, gesture, position of feminist work, feminist solidarity and even the feminist by design or by accident? Adding up all the feminist actions gives us a collective “feminicity”; a state without territorially policed borders, which could produce liveable structures that form and distribute equitable governance, education, health, and sustainability of the environment and its healthfulness; a life of wellbeing for all that want to live, contribute and die within it. The dream of the feminist project is to enable such a state to become a condition for all places. The deactivation of military activities in all spheres of life and the deactivation of masculinist-only genealogies of cultures are the conditional properties of this state. But – how to articulate, and enable?

## Predication

For feminists, an important distinction is sometimes overlooked when naming something as gendered. Describing a status or position is different to the process that we recognize as *predication*, whereby the *activity* of being something is the focus. Explanations of meanings that are informed by already devised classifications work to organize visual and textual forms and ideas by imposing ordering-words and visual-cultural (and thus political) systems of images and texts. Predicated labels designate images – for example, “of” something (whether genders, technologies or nations) or “as” something (labels such as “the good girl”, “lesbian vampire killer”, “the monstrous-feminine”, etc). There is no static position or essence of a gender, but there are these essential, shifting referent, “authorial” names (Scott, 2011, p. 11; DeKoven, 2001, p. 3; Kurikka, 2013) in a “process of making a means visible as such” (Kurikka, 2013, p. 126). Although social media may code the possibility of what looks like an individuating spatial site for recording action, the digital platform can only register a universalising algorithm.

Naming is where a state of being is prescribed as an ontology of relational terms that say more about the ontology of the organising framework of the descriptor than about the ontology of the image itself. This is the problematic of hylomorphism that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) displace, when they critique the schematizations of difference as representational repetition and instead advocate focusing on the geopolitics of organisms-in-the-worlds; articulating the systems creating ontologies, rather than imagining that individual subjects hold any self-determination that can be precisely labelled. However, as we learn from the work of feminist new materialist theorists (Haraway, 1997; Grosz, 2005; Braidotti, 2006; Coole and Frost, 2010; Van Der Tuin, 2014), to identify or name a relationality is simply not enough in terms of the *adoption, implementation, and practice* of better conditions for the lived experiences of diverse subjects and communities in existence today. The mode of activities needs to be better understood in terms of its method of enabling materialist informatics (Colman, 2014). Actions and interventions of feminicity are not only the political manifestations of what Bonnie Honig in her book *Emergency Politics* (2009, p. 25) points to as Western philosophical thinking about divergent “material conditions” for living; they also record, as Wajcman describes, the details about “real women’s experience of structural domination” (2004, p. 99). However, in the vernacular political realm, these conditions of are not detailed in terms of the continuing gender inequities in institutional behaviour concerning gender, even as general cultural awareness of gender rights have changed in some parts of the world, and even if – as Nancy Fraser (2013, p. 212ff) broadly argues – this shift toward a cultural evenness in the treatment of genders is, in fact, part of the mechanism of state-organised capitalism’s market desires. The use of women’s labour in certain gendered roles remains tethered, with the

“dream of women’s emancipation harnessed to the engine of capital accumulation” (Fraser, 2013, p. 240). The terms of making the “means visible” require a number of stages for feminicity to be identifiable: identification of the filter, the method of naming, the addressing of the platform through which a technological condition is enabled and enables production and the addressing of the processual components of the situation and, finally, any catalytic elements (situation, duration) contributing to the changes underway.

That gender power is a medium of exchange is a well-documented and dominant image of our contemporary society; as Fraser identifies it, it is the “power of male domination” (Fraser, 2013, p. 37). In addressing the exchange power of the image (as an aggregated force or an affective marker of the gender factors of societies), I am drawing attention to the informatics of the image as a material thing. In digital cultures, the image takes on and produces a different materiality to that conceived by biological or analog technology (cf. Ernst, 2012; Bühlmann, 2014). Here we could speak of the terms that theorists employ as markers to try to capture this materiality through mediation, even in a non-capitalist register, namely, *a thousand tiny sexes, jouissance, desire, plasticity*. Are these gendered states? Let us call them vectors of feminicity for now, or images of change.

With the image, the predicate state is framed as subjectivity in activity, providing an image of something framed and directed by its medium platform. The image is either held, expanded or moved and is in interactivity with other images, productive of a predicated state of being, which may be dynamic or in stasis, contingent upon other factors such as the power or energy structures enabling or controlling it, whether narrative, genre or the political condition of the image. In description, the image may be “free” or “enslaved”, it may be “sexualized” or “neutered”, it may be “real” or it may be “fiction”. In application, predicate states can ascribe gendered aspects – Iris Marion Young’s famous essay, ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ (1980), offers one critique of the predicate state of gendered activity. As we know from the work of theorists including Braidotti (2006) and Butler (1991), *learning how to perform* the predication that specific gender roles require is a modality that ensures that subjectivity is given value through the pathways chosen (identification with consumerist pleasures, for example). Let me turn, for the sake of brevity, to just one of the markers of feminicity, that of Catherine Malabou’s work on “plasticity”.

In the opening pages of *Changing Difference* (2011), Malabou begins by defining “the meaning of the ‘feminine’”, noting as follows:

Woman as a predicate is no longer an obvious given, if in fact it ever was. So if the feminine has a “meaning”, it is in as much as the permission to question the identity of woman follows from the deconstruction and displacement of this identity. (Malabou, 2011, p. 6)

Malabou here points to the determination of a “feminine” through one of the aspects that feminism has enabled, namely “the permission

to question”. In the activity of questioning, Malabou identifies the infelicitous reinscription of the binary of a feminine position through its naming. However, in this predicated action of questioning, a feminicity is also enacted, read as positive movement of the natural entropic change of the walls of the masculinist hierarchy, so that little by little, these walls are eroded, becoming something else

In the concluding chapter of *Changing Difference*, Malabou addresses the notion of what she calls ‘Women’s Possibility’ (Malabou, 2011, p. 90-141). She raises the spectre of an individual in the philosophy classroom, where, gendered and identifying as female, she finds herself in an affective physiological and mental state of female-gendered timidity and of female-gendered hesitation (Malabou, 2011, p. 113). Reflecting, Malabou concludes that even after deconstruction of that gendered state, the gleaning of the knowledge of how to perform (in Butler’s terms) the act of being not-timid is about being worthy of her place of thinking “with them” (Malabou, 2011, p. 122). But instead of defining woman as this de Beauvoirian (Simone de Beauvoir) or Irigararian (Luce Irigaray) not-one negative – or as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, “woman as pure disposable matter” (Levinas, 1961, cited in Malabou, 2011, p. 130) – Malabou argues that her position, as a woman philosopher in 2009 (her time of writing), is, in fact, impossible without “doing violence” upon its structures and upon herself (Malabou, 2011, pp. 139-41). The argument she makes is to consider how to think of woman’s possibility in the face of philosophy’s impossibility – a possible way “to imagine the possibility of woman starting from the structural impossibility [that woman] experiences of not being violated, in herself and outside, everywhere” (Malabou, 2011, p. 140).

Malabou asks us to rethink gender at the level of the body in the terms of an “original biological malleability, a first transformability” (Malabou, 2011, p. 138). She heeds us to rethink our prejudices against the essentialist positions that second-wave feminists critiqued, citing the example of Beatriz Preciado’s book *Testo Junkie* (2009), a docu-fictive account of experimentation upon the body with hormones injection. For those bodies who have ever ingested chemicals, steroids or hormones of any kind for whatever purpose (birth control, height control, form control), the premise of Preciado’s story is nothing new, but what Malabou’s use of this story does is add to her own account of what the figure of woman travelling through philosophical and cultural discourses can do. Instead of describing woman as a gendered subject in terms of being a mirror, parody, mimetic function or “replica” (Malabou, 2011, p. 110), the intervention in the construction of gender forms, as Malabou reminds us, cannot just be a deconstructive move that, in itself, performs “mimicry” (Malabou, 2011, p. 108) of form, as if expression of a simulacrum would provide anything useful to say about the condition that a person, gendered by their political identity, culture or society, finds herself in, unable to speak and timid. Malabou proposes that we think the concept of *plasticity*, which, despite the position that her mentor

Derrida accorded *plasticity* (as an explosive essence, thus halting the kinetic power of the hypothesis), refutes any fixed notion of “gender” (Malabou, 2011, p.120). As such, Malabou stages a predication of feminicity and refuses to remove herself from the arena; but she also *demand*s acknowledgment for the very serious nature of her proposition for the discipline of philosophy – a masculinist discipline that is in error in its thinking, that has subjected itself to violence through its own structural refusal to think through the platforms, or bodies, that enable change in the world by their various catalytic encounters or through plugins such as extra information that an organism such as the body must adapt, reject, mutate or transform.

Malabou’s position is that the body is a biological and physiological entity, subject to mutation and transformation through socio-biological (cultural, physical, chemical, pharmaceutical, cerebral) processes wrought by experience. Referring to Heidegger’s notion of “essence”, Malabou argues that ‘in the end essence does not say presence; it says entry into presence, in other words, an originary movement that, again, is the movement of change or exchange’ (Malabou, 2011, p. 136).<sup>1</sup> This opens up the possibility (without offering any guarantees) that genders/woman will perform as plastic exploding inevitable. Experience is a temporal marker of the technological conditions of gender’s ability to perform itself – appropriately, a situation that Malabou rejects in her call for a reconsideration of the material details of a body’s situated being-in-transformation. This is not, I would argue, an immaterial matter, but is a coming into transformation; a dynamic point of feminicity. Becoming is exchanged for a situated, materialized, plastique body. This body is transforming, but the changes are facilitated, speeded up and slowed through technology; rendered through coded languages.

What Malabou does not give us in this account of the condition of an entity’s temporality is a sense of its form. What does this metamorphosis look like? How will I understand it when I see it? Or am I just to think it, imagine, write or sing about it? When I see an image of a child soldier, gender performing as a violent masculinist subject, brandishing weaponry and enacting an enforced performance of militaristic aggression I accept that his cognitive, intellectual and physical body has been transformed. But – into what? Taking Malabou’s account of a notion of gender, I want to suggest that the appraisal of a gendered body as a body in the world positions this body as a technology. As a platform that is capable of mediation, it is a medium and a media. It is capable of ingesting different substances for energy, pleasure or death and of transforming its material form – transforming its “brain” (in Malabou’s language). It is capable of cognitive and physical mutation. It is capable of metamorphosis. But what does it imagine?

## New materialist images of kinetic matter

If we chart the discursive matter of the perception of images we find the attention of feminicity shifts, as one might expect, as language usage shifts and mutates, when not isolated by hermeneutic territorial thinking. Haraway, as just one example, points out in multiple places in her work the problems with focusing on just naming difference, e.g., naming gender or naming the differences between machine and human (Nakamura, 2003; Haraway, 1997; 1991. See also self-reflexive comments in Terry and Calvert, 1997 and in Wajcman, 2004).

One of the key realms for feminicity’s attention to the political power of informatics is as discursively coded matter – the political ramifications of the material image (for example, the destroyed bodies of children and, in particular, pregnant and birthing women in distress in the globally circulated digital images from the 2014 Gaza war). This discursive matter itself is subject to the historicity of styles of expression. For example, Katherine Hayles, in 1993, addressed the “kinaesthetic” as well as the “conceptual” dimensions of what she refers to as “the text” (Hayles, 1993, p. 26). By the end of the 1990s, Hayles was more attentive to the “visualization routines that render [her computer programmes] as pixilated images of embodied creatures” (Hayles, 1999/2005, p. 194). The attention to the text, word or code as image, or as imaging, was subject to a range of emotive and affectively subjective descriptions in its first incarnations of coding, with numerous linguistic games played on the physicality of the binary code names of bits, bytes, and words. Gendering and deconstructive gendering activities with this form of textual abstract attention are analysed through the methodology of the new materialist feminists, who question the instrumentality of the platforms, as much as they are attuned by and for them (Adam, 1998; Plant, 1998; Bassett, 2013). Hayles’ attention to the materiality of the informatics at her fingertips – and its resultant mutation in modes of perception and visualization of data – leads her to speculate not on the phenomenology of “a subjectivity”, but begins to question the notion of individuation through the mediation of the digital. Questioning the instrumentality of the digital and examining the notion of where thought resides, Hayles argues that we should think of cognition as not being located simply in either the human subject – a person as a powerful cognitive processor – in a machine, ie, the computer as a powerful cognitizer, but with cognition of something resting within the system as a whole (Hayles, 2012, p. 92).

What is implicit when we describe images with words are the processes of information exchange at work in the manifested image. These processes are the data systems that don’t so much perform as stage the platform, algorithmically, these are the filters and the

1. Space permitting, we could here address the work of biologist Lynn Margulis in terms of the hypothesis of symbiogenesis and her endosymbiotic theory (Margulis and Sagan, 2003)

catalysts of energy materialized into codes written according to perceptual schemas, which are the directors of “points of view”; positionality, laws, ideas (De Lauretis, 1987; Hayles, 1993; 1999; Haraway, 1991; Fuller, 2005; Terry and Calvert, 1997; Barad, 2007). In writing these codes, exchange values often precede the systems of measurement to be set up, determining what kinds of energies are to be measured as image functions: inequalities, surpluses, desires, affects, etc. Under the practice of some authors, materials are not just semiotic indices of prefigured forms but are recorded as measurements of energy exchanges. Coded languages can record within systems, but those systems may be hylomorphic or may attempt to produce new morphogenetic potential of the matter as imaged/materialized – where the discursive matter binds the perception of the informatic exchange of materials.

In other words, in responding to images of the world, the written articulation of the image must choose the ways in which it accounts for the imaging – the image in and of the world and its modes of conceptualization. Information exchange is energy exchange and this process is manifested in part through the imagery that the media circulate as images-of-the-world. Exchanges of information take place through the coded movements of physical, biological and digital data, where energy transformed into (sound+) images are schematized according to the informatics logics directed by contemporary technologies of perception. Various described, the images-of-the-world are thus catalytic vectors and affects of micro- and macro-political differences that perpetuate, engender, collate and enflame difference.

## Observations to be noted as vectorial points for feminicity

Malabou observes: “Everything starts with metamorphosis” (Malabou, 2011, p. 139). For Barad, Malabou’s “starting point” could be the vector of “intra-action” (Barad, 2007). For Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, a process of reassembling the steps of change is required. Cautioning that the measurement process involves a human-technology assemblage that remains subject to gender-specific performativity, Lorenz-Meyer advocates the use of a three-stage model where the “gendering apparatuses of bodily production” can be turned toward a productive form of the “reassembling of gender” (Lorenz-Meyer, 2014, p. 93). For Bühlmann (2014), the physics of the digital must be accounted for as “mediagenic phenomena” which “are continuously being engendered from within the order of operativity within which we choose to address problems”, in a space of “encryption”.

We can use the discursive matter of feminicity to articulate the living capital body – as image and as a materialized informatics – involving identification of the predication of feminicity and, indeed, of masculinity, unicity and other technicities. When we join the biopolitical

organization of gender with descriptions of epistemological forms and the practices of materialist informatics by feminist thinkers, we find the critiques of the problematics of gendered social conditions concerning reproductive conditions, sexuality and racialized differences are identified, thereby enabling analysis, paradigmatic overviews and further relationalities to be drawn. However, as we have discussed, images-of-the-world are material things – artifacts of a specific time and locationary political situation – and thus are subject to the physical laws that govern matter in the universe, at least in terms of how we are able to articulate that matter at this particular historical time. Images are evidence of a particular condition of matter, testimonials to their material ‘onto-epistemological level,’ as van der Tuin argues (2014, p. 45).

## Some conclusions: new materialist feminicity I platforms, filters, catalysers

Looking at image cultures presents us with what is often characterized in terms of aesthetics: however, I feel a more robust set of terms is required to address the current realm of forms and practices of feminist, materialist informatics that focuses on the information of gendered images in a time of ethnic cleansing, of unethical economic rationalization that prevents the flow of humans from seeking basic living resources around the globe, of activities of militarism – all enacting the aesthetic desires of the prevailing system of governance.

In new materialist considerations of the image as a mattered aesthetic intra-active affective measure, the reflex of rationality that we can, with historical hindsight, recognize as fully formed naturalist philosophies of a cultured state (ie, the fascist trajectory) is something to be identified and rallied against. This is the political state bringing identity politics into play as a structural device of its very own sovereignty and constitutive of generic models of identity and life forms, and having – as thinkers such as Guattari and Braidotti have worked extensively to point out – extremely damaging effects on existential and practical forms of living and life. Furthermore, thinking about the laws that describe negentropic and entropic exchanges of energy – taken here as exchanges of information – the aesthetic reflex of an image form will inevitably mutate into some other materialist informatics and indeed some other matter.

So in this time of informatics, how do we apply our thinking and advise political policy makers on the problems of difference that are maintained by the material infrastructures that govern the world and control the position and use of things in the world?

The philosophies of technology – the digital mode I am thinking with here – are interested in the filters afforded by the body that may be addressed as a collective whole, as a singular consciousness, as abstracted and non-human or as an informatics body itself. The network [to use a mix of Hayles and Guattari’s language] is the co-

joining of multiple non-conscious cognitive machines that are involved in mass-communication information-producing systems that feed and direct conscious cognate machines and beings.

Identified at junctures when human actions affect a change in the ways in which the matter of the world is configured, an informatics of matter can always be a political measure. Given this measurability through its variables, a question arises concerning the *conditions of the ontological production of the imaged, gendered body*: how does the imaged mediation of the biopolitical body contribute to a perspective of life?

If we think about the co-constitutive nature of image information, it is a form of non-individuated communication, a generative informatic that works by asymmetrical epistemic platforms, filters and catalysers. Yet the image, even in its manipulated, used, mutilated and dead state, is seen to be creative of an ontology and not just regarded as a “narratology of things” (Gratton, 2014, p. 125). As an image among other images it is made and harvested by the non-conscious cognitive machine to present as a critical mass, for differing political ends – sometimes as protest, sometimes as abstraction and sometimes as coercion by the capitalist system that produced it.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the image requires further critique.

Variouly described, the images-of-the-world are materialized vectors and affects of micro and macropolitical differences, perpetuating, engendering, collating and enflaming difference. The terms of deconstruction and displacement of identity – as described by Malabou – are feminist strategies that I would include in the register of feminicity, as a conceptual and practised animation of feminist demands for equitable image conditions by articulating, expressing, defining and responding to an “image of gendered being”. Instances of feminicity in the media, on screens and in accounts of image practices present or articulate where ontological change has been registered, leading to a cognizance of change in the on-screen configuration of bodies, but also contributing to the historicity of the interventionist moment through the values/aesthetics/sensibilities of the proliferation of the image.

One way to define current feminist new materialist generational work is the desire to be mindful (and careful) not to name things by the outcomes of their relationships before we understand the *how* of the material basis of things. This involves a testing and critical approach to not just materials but also to epistemic validity, ie, classification of materials, material concepts and material images for their validity at any particular time and place (gold, titanium, copper). As Fraser pointed out, “feminist theorists cannot avoid the question of a capitalist society” (Fraser, 2013, p. 227).

Knowledge does not hold some type of solution to present problems “in the future” and there is no utopic place where the

human race will rest. Understanding the micro-matter of materials first enables connections and then recognizes plugins to be made. For new materialists, this is not just writing or performing the theoretical or abstract definition of relationalities. Rather, this is seeking the points where we can figure out the micro-details in the micro-data that has filtered through various platforms in order to produce, generate, join and integrate into something different, something positive for feminist bodies.

The insistence on a move from the feminist to a demand for recognition of the conglomerate states of feminicity, by materialist evidentiary proof and by materialist speculative ontological form (as we see in the works of Bühlmann, 2014; Malabou, 2011; Torlasco, 2013) and the application of new feminist materialist methods across a range of disciplinary fields (Barad, 2007; Van Der Tuin, 2014; Lorenz-Meyer, 2014; Barrett and Bolt, 2014) works to mediatize the affectivity of feminist political demands for societies. Achieving shifts in cultural determinations enables the dissipation of possible and rigid states where change is slow or stalled. Such mediatization is generated through all types of feminist platforms that are catalogued by feminicity’s charting of the movements of territorialities of bodies, sexualities and intellectual and aesthetic pursuits. Where practices of feminicity have been mediatized, interaction with rigid social and historical codings takes place, speeding up that process of change.

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**CV**

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## ARTICLE

**NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”****Becoming Otherwise: Embodied Thinking and the “Transformative Matter” of (New) Feminist Materialist Theorizing****Krizia Nardini**

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**Abstract**

Beyond the affirmation of theory as an abstract, disembodied mindful project defined in opposition to a too-corporeal passive (feminized) matter/body by poststructuralist feminist materialist philosophers (ie., Irigaray, Rich, Cavarero, Braidotti), theorizing has been reformulated as an embodied process, in which the corporeality of the thinking subject – among other factors – is called upon in order to rethink simultaneously what it means to theorize and what it means to exist as a corporeal subject. Similarly, riding the critical-creative wave of reclaiming the agential materiality of “embodied-embedded” (Braidotti, 2011) thinking processes, the question that remains crucial (in both senses of the word *to matter*) to new feminist materialist conversations is “how does theorizing *matter*?” Reading poststructuralist feminist movements affirmatively, this text aims to stress the relevance of going beyond the dominant Western philosophical habitus of thinking disembodiedly “from nowhere”, namely from the position of a neutral or “abstract masculinity” (Hartsock, 1987), arguing, with Van der Tuin and Dolphijn (2010; 2011), that theorizing is “always already” a material-discursive ongoing practice. Moreover, acknowledging the material processes of theorizing is not only relevant when it comes to “onto-epistemological” accountability (Barad, 2003), but also is a task that carries with it ethico-political implications inasmuch as, only by virtue of acknowledging how theorizing does *matter*, the inner transformative potential of new feminist materialism becomes possible. The phrase “becoming otherwise” is therefore introduced here to point to the generative force that a new feminist materialist framework assigns to concepts and to “onto-ethico-epistemological” (Barad, 2003) processes of embodied-embedded theory making(s).

**Keywords**

new feminist materialisms, onto-epistemology, corporeal feminism, abstract masculinity

## *Volverse otro: el pensamiento encarnado y la «materia o importancia transformadora» de la teorización del (nuevo) materialismo feminista*

### **Resumen**

Más allá de afirmar la teoría como proyecto abstracto, incorpóreo y consciente, que se define en oposición a una materia demasiado corpórea, pasiva (y feminizada), según filósofas materialistas postestructuralistas y feministas como Irigaray, Rich, Cavarero o Braidotti, la teorización se ha reformulado como un proceso en el que se invoca la corporeidad del sujeto pensante –entre otros factores– para replantearse, al mismo tiempo, qué significa teorizar y qué significa existir como sujeto corpóreo. De manera similar, y apuntándose a la tendencia crítica y creativa de reclamar la materialidad agencial de los procesos de pensamiento «encarnado e incardinado» (Braidotti, 2011), la pregunta que sigue resultando crucial para las conversaciones del nuevo materialismo feminista es «¿Cómo se materializa la teorización?» y «¿Cómo importa?» (considerando los dos sentidos de matter como «materia» e «importar»). Al interpretar los movimientos feministas postestructuralistas de manera afirmativa, este texto pretende enfatizar la relevancia de ir más allá de la costumbre filosófica que constituye el pensamiento incorpóreo «desde ninguna parte», es decir, planteado desde una «masculinidad abstracta» (Hartsock, 1987) o neutra, dado que, junto con Van der Tuin y Dolphijn (2010, 2011) se argumenta que la teorización «ya es siempre» una práctica material y discursiva continuada. Es más, reconocer los procesos materiales de la teorización no solo resulta relevante en lo referente a la responsabilidad «onto-epistemológica» (Barad, 2003), sino que además es una tarea con implicaciones éticas y políticas, en tanto que solo reconociendo cómo se materializa e importa la teorización se plantea el posible potencial transformador interno del nuevo materialismo feminista. Así, la expresión «volverse otro» se introduce en este texto para señalar la fuerza generativa que el marco del nuevo materialismo feminista asigna a conceptos y procesos onto-ético-epistemológicos (Barad, 2003) de elaboración de teoría encarnada e incardinada.

### **Palabras clave**

nuevos materialismos feministas, onto-epistemología, feminismo corpóreo, masculinidad abstracta

## **Engaging with feminist materialisms**

What is theory? What does it mean to theorize? These very questions, albeit at different times and with differing outcomes, have been pivotal for the conceptual *oeuvre* of feminist poststructuralist materialist theorists. Recalling the work of Adrienne Rich (1987), an influential feminist thinker and poet, I would like to argue that:

Theory, the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees, theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and return to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth. (Rich, 1987, pp. 213-14)

Just like another very well known feminist scholar suggests, theory always “comes from somewhere” (Haraway, 1988). Theory, then, will come back where it came from, in its own movements, it will “return to earth over and over” (Rich, 1987). And, in order to do

good – to be generative, to speak to the world, to make a difference, to be e/affective, as Rich calls for – theory should carry the sensory traces of its own genealogy.

What is theory? Mainstream Western philosophy, defined as the thinking activity of the mind, is rooted in the Platonic and then Cartesian dualisms that oppose pure theory to the passive state of matter/corporeality. The main efforts of feminist (materialist) thinkers, among them Luce Irigaray, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, has been that of unpacking the questions at stake within this dualistic opposition structurally inherent to Western philosophy and asking: What is theory? Who can be a subject of theory? Consequently, the gendered character of the body/mind dualism in relation to theory formation is exposed and the entitled thinking subject, defined as “abstract masculinity” (Hartsock, 1987), is deconstructed together with his universal claims, affirmed traditionally in opposition to the all-too-corporeal (feminized) “others” of philosophy: women, ethnic others, children, non-human others, matter itself.

Engaging with sexual difference feminisms (Irigaray, 1985; AAVV, 1990) and with their nomadic and Deleuzian re-writings (Braidotti, 2002, 2011; Colebrook, 2000a), we can read how sheer transcendence (and disembodied theory), as an essentially “human” (read: rational, universal and masculine) thinking activity, belongs to a historically situated idea of subjectivity defined by excluding from itself the dimensions of femininity and corporeality (and, some scholars would now add, animality and matter). Following the work of Genevieve Lloyd (1984), Claire Colebrook explains how, in Western philosophy, reason and masculinity are co-defined in a dualist opposition to the body and femininity:

[n]ot only western thought devalued the body and femininity; both the feminine and the body are *negated* in the constitution of thought *as thought*. Reason does not just occur through a subordination of the body. Reason *is* disembodied and is essentially and radically divided from materiality. (Colebrook, 2000b, p. 28; emphasis in the original)

Thus, the dualism on which western philosophy is built is precisely that which opposes (dualistically and in a gendered manner) thought to embodiment, and that which constructs the power of rational philosophical thinking on the negation of corporeality/femininity/matter. (White) masculinity emerges as an unmarked and disembodied category, partaking in the required attributes of the thinking subject. In dualistic opposition, we find femininity and its own baggage of bodylines and sexual difference-otherness (Lloyd, 1984). This is why Rosi Braidotti in *Patterns of Dissonance* – and referring to the work of Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray – explores the meaning of theorizing as a “female-embodied thinker” and stresses that “one of the main issues for women in contemporary philosophy is the need to speak about the *bodily roots* of the thinking process” (Braidotti, 1991, p. 8; emphasis mine).

According to Braidotti (1994; 2011), processes of theory formation are necessarily “embodied-embedded”. These very partial locations, endowed with the active materiality of the networks and connections that enable the making of theory, cannot be escaped. However, the partial, embodied-embedded coordinates from which theory emerges can, in fact, be silenced and overlooked; this is the case when theory is practiced by the distant gaze of a “modest witness” (Haraway, 1997) and when partiality, embodiment and embedded location are not acknowledged. In this case, objectivity is claimed and with this “god trick” the thinker can enjoy the epistemic privilege of his “view from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988).

## Questioning abstract masculinity

Emerging within the framework of French post-structuralism is the body of sexual difference theories (largely represented by Luce

Irigaray) that powerfully criticize – both on a symbolic and on a social level – the centrality of disembodied, rationalist and universal masculinity in western culture (phallogocentrism). Sexual difference philosophies denounce the universal value attributed to the masculine gender through diagnosing the “perverse” logic (Braidotti, 2005) underpinning phallogocentrism: the *asymmetrical* same/other dualism that organizes all other dichotomous pairs in a hierarchical and gendered way: femininity/masculinity, passion/reason, body/mind, immanence/transcendence, being/thought, nature/culture, personal/political, etc. Willing to overcome dualistic oppositions and disembodied subject-positions, sexual difference theorists argue that corporeality is constitutive of what it is and means to *exist* and *think*; therefore, stressed is the importance of the embodied nature of subjectivity as the site of resistance for being (ontologically) and thought (epistemologically) against the sexually undifferentiated (universally masculine) logic of *the same*.

Thanks to feminist theories it became possible to deconstruct the phallogocentric system that gave the thinking subject the attributes of masculinity or “abstract virility” (Braidotti, 2005, p. 299). Therefore, in deconstructing phallogocentrism and situating it within its historical geo-political context, it is clear that, as a result of historical *power/knowledge* relations (Foucault, 1980), the located position of a white, male, heterosexual, rational, able-bodied and property-owning subject became the “anthropological paradigm of modernity” (Boccia, 2002) – namely the human (the norm) against which *embodied others* (Ahmed, 2000) were marked by a pejorative negative difference and did not make it to full humanity. Drawing on Nancy Hartsock’s feminist political theoretical formulation of the problem (1987) and, following the line of the abovementioned criticisms coming from sexual difference theories and feminist nomadism, in this article I employ the concept of *abstract masculinity* to refer to the subject position that stands at the centre of phallogocentric ontology (social relations) and epistemology (modes of thought). Reflecting back on the question of Western ontological and epistemological dualism, Hartsock writes:

Dualism, along with the dominance of one side of the dichotomy over the other, marks phallogocentric society and social theory. These dualisms appear in a variety of forms in philosophy, technology, political theory, and the organization of class society itself [...]. *Abstract masculinity*, then, can be seen to have structured western *social relations* and the *modes of thought* to which these relations give rise at least since the founding of the polis (Hartsock, 1987: 169-170; emphasis mine).

It is indeed with the notion of abstract masculinity that Hartsock pointed at the position of universal-disembodied masculinity as what structured Western-modern (phallogocentric) historical conditions on a social, cultural and epistemological level.

With *situated knowledges*, Donna Haraway takes part in the project of questioning abstract masculinity, adding her own contribution to

many other critical approaches coming from different perspectives (eg., feminist theories and epistemologies, critical theories, critical sociology, postmodern anthropology, etc.). The “enemy” indeed, Haraway writes, has been clearly described with Hartsock’s concept of abstract masculinity (Haraway, 1988, p. 578), similar to the very modest witness of scientific experiments that works as “the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, his biasing embodiment” (Haraway, 1997, p. 24). He is self-invisible and transparent and his words are “not polluted by the body” (Haraway, 1997, p. 32). The universalistic epistemic tendencies of the traditional subject of philosophy grounded their certainties and faith in a disembodied western reason that allows man to become “the invisible gendered subject” (Whitehead, 2004). The way out from *his* position regarding the “god trick”, Haraway argues, is only possible through a responsible commitment to self-positioning and to a knowledge-practice that is necessarily embodied, situated and partial:

We seek not the knowledge ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of one true world) and disembodied vision. We seek these ruled by partial sight and limited voice –not partially for its own sake but rather, for the sake of connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. (Haraway, 1988, p. 590)

Haraway’s critique is meant to expose the power location of the very unmarked category whose viewpoint comes “from nowhere”, who can unfairly enjoy what *he* calls “objectivity”. However, as Haraway states “the only position from which objectivity could not be possibly be practiced and honoured is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all differences” (Haraway, 1988, p. 587).

Understanding thought as embodied-embedded, in her work Braidotti (1994; 2002; 2011) develops a thinking strategy aimed at making room for a different understanding of difference(s). Drawing on the nomadic vibe of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), Braidotti adds to it her own feminist twist: the concept of sexual difference and the practice of the politics of location (Rich, 1987). Differences are understood beyond dualism, that is, beyond the hierarchical one/other opposition. Difference, rather than as the devalued counterpart of the norm, is reaffirmed positively in its generative force of creativity and becoming: in new feminist materialist terms, we could more adequately say “differing” (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2011).

## Towards new feminist materialism

Epistemologically, Braidotti’s feminist nomadism becomes the figuration for a philosophical cartographic method in which theory

is performed in its “always already” be(com)ing within embodied-embedded relations of power. Creativity, awareness, responsibility and willingness to make these relations visible are all tasks involved within this new materialist, feminist nomadic philosophical project. Approaching theory-making as coming (affectively, effectively) from the cartography of contemporary relations of power, this method wants to show “the bodily roots of the thinking process” by practicing the politics of location. Locating oneself in his/her own body is more than understanding what it means to have a certain body – as Adrienne Rich powerfully puts it: “to recognize the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go” (Rich, 1987, p. 215-16) in order to “recognize our location, having to name the ground we’re coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted (Rich, 1987, p. 219). On an onto-epistemological level, as Karen Barad (2003) would say, the creative outcomes go towards the affirmation of multiple, situated and differing locations for accountable, embodied-embedded theory making(s). In fact, this approach is crucial within a new feminist materialist take on theory formation, in which “dualism is pushed to its own extreme” and traditional dualisms are transversally re-*thought through* (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010; 2011). Thus, theorizing from situated perspectives not only subverts the dualisms on which Western philosophy and abstract masculinity builds (eg., thought/corporeality, transcendence/immanence), but also engenders modes of *engaging with* and *thinking through* difference(s) “beyond dualism”: allowing differences to *differ* in a plural and horizontal way.

The philosophical impetus of overcoming dualisms does not leave untouched the great divide between ways of being and ways of knowing. As a matter of fact, ontology and epistemology are approached in their mutual co-constitution. In a new feminist materialist framework, Barad’s “onto-epistemology” (Barad, 2003) is therefore used to indicate a *non-representationalist* approach to discursive practices and processes of knowledge building. In this sense, reality is conceptualized in a monist and “intra-active” (Barad, 2003) way in which the knowledges of the world, rather than being thought to “represent” or “illustrate” reality objectively, are produced by and contribute to engendering material-semiotic processes of change. Ontology is conceptualized as a rhizomatic network of becoming(s) or material-discursive intra-actions. What we are witnessing is a reality with no copies and no originals, in which everything becomes intransitively, at various speeds and intensities, interconnected with other processes of transformation(s). Therefore, within this radical immanent ontology of becoming, there is no room for structural dualisms or representationalist instances.

Re-thinking the productivity of theorizing by overcoming representationalism and dualistic oppositions (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010), new feminist materialism asks, instead, *how questions* and takes onto-epistemology as its methodology. In this way, moving beyond the gesture of separating thought (epistemology) from being (ontology), the *transversality* of new materialism engages

with (etico)-onto-epistemological questions, where what exists in the world is always already in a relation of *intra-activity* with what we know and say about it, and vice-versa, because, as Barad states, “we are part of [the world] we seek to understand” (Barad, 2003, p. 828). Drawing upon Barad’s article titled “Posthumanist Performativity” (2003), the notion of *ethico-onto-epistemology* allows us to unpack the dynamics according to which “phenomena come to *matter*” (Barad, 2003, p. 817) – co-constitutively, on a material, discursive and ethical level. It is by following this very line that new feminist materialism seeks to understand the ways in which theorizing does *matter*, in both senses of the word.

### How does theorizing *matter*?

New materialism provides the conceptual tools for opening up theory formation and understanding thought as always already embodied and located within spatio-temporal coordinates. That is why – faithful to Haraway’s concept of *situated knowledges* as “the politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition to be heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, p. 591) – there is, in a new materialist framework, no room for disembodied god tricks: what is taken as accountable knowledge is situated in partial perspectives. Therefore, in a methodological choice that is part of a new materialist framework, we can apply the insights offered by third wave feminist epistemology in order to “capture the new order consisting of non-dialectical approaches in the field of feminist knowledge theory” (van der Tuin, 2009, p. 27). This task involves being aware of the power/knowledge nexus, making visible the situatedness and the embodied-location(s) of every knowledge claim and, thus, being committed toward onto-epistemological accountability – both in content and in the process of knowledge production.

On a methodological level, a new materialist perspective allows, as I mentioned above, *how* questions to be asked, i.e., questions that do not presuppose their “object of inquiry” to be grasped “out there” (i.e., the *what*) or to be explained in a teleological fashion (i.e., the *why*), but rather which allow the possibility of asking questions that focus on *processes* (i.e., the *how* of *becoming*) of *material-semiotic* intra-actions (Haraway, 1988; Barad, 2003), within both the “object of knowledge” and in the making of “knowledge itself” (apparatuses of production). Drawing on Barad’s concept of (ethico)-onto-epistemology, in a post-humanist performative framework, the cartographical method provided by new materialism consists, therefore, of mapping out how *boundaries* are drawn and how contemporary power relations operate. Indeed, a new feminist materialist approach focuses on the agencially and intra-activity of these relations, without aiming to be an epistemology of representation. Therefore, as an (ethico)-onto-epistemological strategy, new feminist materialism is about

addressing the *how* of the *mattering* of phenomena: the differing intra-active forces of the present in their interconnected becomings.

Moreover, focusing on the unfolding of the event in its intra-actions, new feminist materialism argues that “we know nothing of the (social) body until we know what it *can do*” (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010, p. 17; emphasis mine). Indeed, as Barad writes in relation to the potential of change implicit within *intra-actions*:

Intra-actions have the potential to do more than participate in the constitution of the geometries of power, they *open up possibilities for change* in its topology, and as such interventions in the manifold possibilities made available reconfigure both that will be possible. (Barad, 2001, p. 104; emphasis mine)

This is, therefore, an *onto-epistemological* exercise because it does not separate the material from the discursive in a representationalist manner (but understand both as co-constitutive). It is also an *ethico-political* exercise because – understanding intra-actions as offering possibilities for re-configurations – its aim is to map out relations and open up room for motion and change within re-configurations. As Hinton and Van der Tuin wrote recently in their preface to the special issue *Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism*, the political potential of new feminist materialism entails, in fact, “the careful search after the condition of possibility of *possibility*” (Hinton and Van der Tuin, 2014, p. 6; emphasis in the original). The transformative *matter* of new feminist materialism lies, therefore, in this ethico-onto-epistemological exercise, seeking affirmatively the potential of *becoming otherwise* of matter, of life and of theory (and everything together)

### Conclusion

In this text I have shown in which way some materialist feminist philosophies (i.e., sexual difference theories, corporeal feminisms, feminist nomadism), inspired by Luce Irigaray’s critique of Western phallogocentric metaphysics, creatively elaborate a different way of thinking that tries to move beyond dualisms –on the level of both content and methodology. I suggest that the move beyond dualisms should include a self-reflective instance towards our understanding of philosophical thought *as such* and towards the very thinking strategy we adopt to make theory. Arguing in favour of the onto-epistemological accountability of embodied-embedded thought, I wanted to stress the located character theorizing. As for the (new) materialist feminist philosophies referred to above, going beyond dualisms consists in a critical and affirmative move that also entails the reformulation of thought (and being) as such and leads to overcoming the ontology/epistemology and being/thought dualisms. In other words, the question shifts from “what is theory?” to “how does theorizing *matter*?” Accordingly, a shared point by the (new) materialist feminist

philosophies mentioned here is that corporeality is constitutive of what it means to think and exist; it is important to make explicit the embodied-embedded work of the thinking process so to show that theory does come from somewhere and that, in its co-constitutiveness with a reality in continuous becoming (onto-epistemology), it can make a difference as a creative political project. In particular, in order to become a transformative matter, the theorizing of new feminist materialism is performed beyond representationalist aims; namely, beyond the epistemological temptation of mirroring the real (the *what*) in the objective view of the god trick that guarantees the truth of a representation. New feminist materialism places the emphasis on the creativity of a *concept* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994) and focuses on the generative aspects of theory. Concepts are approached as “apparatuses of knowledge production” (Barad, 2003): they help us address, in a *transformative* and *intra-active* way, the reality we are part of and we try to understand. It is by engaging transversally with the ethical-ontological-epistemological entanglements that room can be created for engendering material-discursive processes of change.

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## CV



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## ARTICLE

**NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”**

## From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape

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**Abstract**

When we try to understand and articulate an artistic practice called performing landscape, it proves helpful to understand various (f)actors, such as, for instance, the wind, the tripod, the scarf, the body, and so on, as interacting collaborators within an assemblage of various materialities (Bennett, 2010). Prompted by Rosi Braidotti's (2013) overview of the discussions around the posthuman, however, we could ask whether it is possible to understand the interaction more like an “intra-action” (Barad, 2007), where the entanglement of the various components is a pre-condition, rather than a result, of the action. Perhaps the split of the artist into a performer in front of the camera and a witness behind it could be understood as an agential cut of sorts? In the case of a previous practice — performing with plants — intra-action is intuitively easier to assume, due to the symbiotic interdependence of animals and plants in their exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. But could we understand performing for the camera, with a small swing attached to a tree, as an intra-action as well? And if so, what would be the methodological advantages of pursuing such an understanding?

This case study set within the field of performance as research and artistic research is related to the mattering of the digital, since the practice itself is to a large extent digital, although the main focus of the paper is on methodological questions.

**Keywords**

intra-action, performing landscape, artistic research, performance as research, environment

*De la interacción a la intra-acción en la performance del paisaje***Resumen**

Quando intentamos entender y articular la práctica artística denominada performance del paisaje, resulta útil comprender varios (f)actores, como por ejemplo el viento, el trípode, el pañuelo, el cuerpo y demás, como elementos colaboradores que interactúan dentro de un ensamblaje de materialidades diversas (Bennett, 2010). No obstante, y considerando la visión que tiene Rosi Braidotti (2013) de los debates acerca de lo posthumano, podríamos preguntarnos si es posible comprender mejor la interacción como una intra-acción (Barad, 2007), donde el enredo de diversos componentes es un requisito esencial y no un resultado de la acción. ¿Puede entenderse la escisión del artista que es performer ante la cámara y al mismo tiempo testigo detrás de ella como un tipo de corte agencial? En el caso de una práctica previa –la performance con plantas– se asume de manera más intuitiva que se trata de una intra-acción, debido a la interdependencia simbiótica de animales y plantas que intercambian oxígeno y dióxido de carbono. ¿Pero podríamos entender la actuación ante la cámara, con un pequeño columpio sujeto a un árbol, también como una intra-acción? Y si es así, ¿cuáles podrían ser las ventajas metodológicas de adoptar esa perspectiva?

Este estudio de caso situado dentro del campo de la performance como investigación e investigación artística está vinculado a la materialización de lo digital, dado que la práctica en sí es en gran medida digital, aunque este artículo se concentra mayoritariamente en cuestiones metodológicas.

**Palabras clave**

*intra-acción, performance del paisaje, investigación artística, performance como investigación, entorno*

**Introduction**

In a recent project, *Year of the Snake Swinging* (2014), performed for the camera once a week for a year on the same island, an aspen growing on the western shore of Harakka Island in Helsinki provided the setting and support for a small swing and served as a figure showing the shifting seasons and the weather. This was the last part in a series of twelve one-year projects, which I began in 2002 and finished in 2014, called *Animal Years*, based on the Chinese calendar and its cycle of twelve years, with each year named after a specific animal. The project explored the question of how to perform landscape today (Arlander, 2012), based on the traditions of performance art, video art and environmental art, and moving in the borderland between them. The most obvious layer of the work during the year of the snake was the movement of the swing, attached to other trees on other shores as well and explored by both visiting performers and myself (see appendix).

Jane Bennett, in her popular book *Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things* (2010) asserts the agency of assemblages. She tries to develop a distributive agency based on Spinoza's "affective" bodies and Deleuze's and Guattari's "assemblages". Assemblages are,

for her "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23-24); power is not distributed equally across their surface, nor does a central head govern them. The effects generated by an assemblage are emergent properties, with an ability to make something happen. Besides the vital force of each member there is efficacy proper to the grouping: an agency of the assemblage, she explains. An assemblage is never a solid block but an open-ended collective, a "non-totalizable sum" with a history of formation and a finite lifespan, she notes (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23-24).

The tree clearly has some agency in the assemblage of wood, rope and branch that forms a swing. And in this case we could add other (f)actors — like the sea, the wind, the cliffs, a human being, a scarf, a video camera on a tripod and more — as interacting collaborators in the assemblage. The agency of technology is evident; if the battery of the camera runs out, the productive capacity of the whole assemblage is affected — hence, no video. But the agency of the aspen is even more palpable — no tree, no branch, no place to fasten the swing. The strange form to the right on the shore in the image (see Figure 1) is the stub of another aspen that used to grow there, but died a few years ago, perhaps because of too much seawater at its roots. By growing next to each other they afforded the fastening of a hammock

between them. Now the other one still provides support for a swing. Acknowledging the agency of the tree suggests further questions. How could we expand our understanding of agency in performance as research? What would that mean in terms of methodology?



Figure 1. Year of the Snake – In the Swing (2014), video still. Camera and performer Annette Arlander.

## Intra-action

Thinking of the swing in terms of entanglement means that the interaction of the elements that form the swing (the small plank, the ropes, the branch of the tree) could better be conceived of as an intra-action, following Karen Barad, since the combination of those elements is a precondition for, rather than the result of, the action.

For Karen Barad, intra-action is a key element of her agential realist framework. It “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” and, unlike the ordinary term interaction, it “recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad, 2007, p. 33). Moreover, they are distinct only in a relational sense: “agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglements, they don’t exist as individual elements” (Barad, 2007). In Barad’s account, phenomena (rather than independent objects) are “the basic units of existence” (Barad, 2007, p. 333). They do not simply mark the inseparability of observer and observed; rather, “phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies’ [...]” (Barad, 2007, p. 139). In short, “phenomena are ontological entanglements” (Barad, 2007, p. 333). Phenomena are produced through intra-actions; as Barad specifies, “it is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and the particular material articulations in the world become meaningful” (Barad, 2007). Thus, “apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary drawing practices — specific material reconfigurings

of the world — which come to matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 140). The differential boundaries between humans and nonhumans, culture and nature, science and the social are constituted through causal intra-actions (Barad, 2007). Entangled practices are productive and who and what are excluded through them matters; different intra-actions produce different phenomena, she notes (Barad, 2007, p. 58).

According to Barad, determinate entities emerge from their intra-action; the term intra-action refers to their ontological inseparability; this contrasts with interaction, which relies on the metaphysics of individualism. Thus we should understand phenomena as specific intra-actions, not as objects-in-themselves. “Since individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge from their intra-action [...] A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an ‘object’ and the ‘measuring agencies’; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them” (Barad, 2007, p. 128). Phenomena for Barad are physical-conceptual (material-discursive) intra-actions, and the term intra-action signifies “the mutual constitution of objects and agencies of observation within phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 197). She summarizes her point as follows: “Different material intra-actions produce different materializations of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 380).

What does this mean with regard to our example of the swing? The swing emerges from the entanglement of rope, wood and tree — but do these things not exist as individual elements before being combined into a swing? Following Barad they do not, since they are all part of the world intra-acting with itself. Through the notion of intra-activity “a lively new ontology emerges” (Barad, 2007, p. 33), which is based on fundamental inseparability. Instead of looking at a swing as an assemblage of pre-existing elements like rope and wood and tree, should we understand the phenomenon of a swing as producing those elements? Perhaps the parts of the swing are parts of a swing only after the swing has come into being. Or, on a more material level, the plank has been part of another tree before being formed into a plank and painted blue. The plastic rope is made of oil, the remains of a forest millions of years ago. These seemingly individual elements are the result of previous intra-actions. The notion of intra-action changes our understanding of our relationship to the environment. Bodies are not simply situated or located in particular environments, Barad explains; rather, environments and bodies are intra-actively co-constituted. “Bodies (‘human’, ‘environmental’ or otherwise) are integral ‘parts’ of, or dynamic reconfigurings of, what is” (Barad, 2007, p. 170).

The relationship between “bodies” and “environment” becomes obvious when working with video imagery. The idea of intra-action as constitutive is easier to understand, because the elements in the image are produced by the intra-action of “measuring agencies” like the camera, the tripod, the framing of the image, and “objects” like the cliff, the sea, the tree, the stub, the swing and the performer. In

the image the swing and the tree form an environment around the human figure, whereas the swing moving on its own becomes a body in its own right, surrounded by an environment. And without the swing the tree and the nearby stub form the main bodies with the sea, the sky and the cliffs as their environment.

## Agential cut

Barad's notion of "agential cut" is useful in this context; according to her, the split into subject and object is enacted in each case, rather than given. "Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., a set of material practices) that effect an *agential cut* between 'subject' and 'object' (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted). That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological or semantic indeterminacy" (Barad, 2007, pp. 139-140). Barad explains how the boundaries and properties of the parts of the phenomenon become determinate only in the enactment of an agential cut that delineates the "measured object" from the "measuring agent". Thus "a correlation between the "causal agency" (cause) and "measuring agency" (effect) is marked by the intra-action of one part of the phenomenon with another" (Barad, 2007, p. 337). And this is not restricted to human activities. "If a measurement is the intra-active marking of one part of a phenomenon by another, where phenomena are specific ontological entanglements, that is, specific material configurations of the world, then there is nothing inherent in the nature of a measurement that makes it irreducibly human centered" (Barad, 2007, p. 338).

In a simplified manner we can understand this through video practice. The camera produces the image by framing it, by creating a cut between what is within and what is outside the frame — between what is part of the image and what is not. This division does not pre-exist in the landscape but emerges through the action of video recording. And this intra-action involves material-discursive practices like the properties of the lens of the camera or my preconceptions of what constitutes a good view and so on. And these, too, are created through the intra-actions.

The notion of agential cut could be useful in describing the practice of performing for a camera on a tripod. The split of the artist into a performer in front of the camera and a witness behind it is an agential cut of sorts. By placing the camera on a tripod the same person can be split into photographer and performer. The camera can be put to record and so can function as a witness and the performer can enter the image, engage in the action and then return to behind the camera to control the result. Unlike with a still camera, the right moments can be chosen later while editing. And unlike with a film camera, the results can be seen at once and the material reused, with a possibility to correct mistakes and improvise.

Yet another kind of agential cut, or rather, measuring agency, is involved in the choice of time schedule. A temporal cut, or temporal framing, takes place when repeating the action once a week, picking "slices of time" in the landscape at one-week intervals. Another "temporal framing", like returning to the same place once a month, would produce another view of the changes in the landscape. Everything between the recorded moments is excluded from the video, a consequence of the cut or jump created by the schedule or the measuring apparatus.

Removing rather than adding slices of documentary material while editing produces an appearance of a new reality. In this case I use all takes in the order of recording, leaving out the sequences where the performer enters and exits the image. Thus, an illusion of continuity is created in the final work. If the performer sits or stands immobile in the landscape, an illusion of her being there while the seasons change is produced. In this example the rhythm of the swing strengthens the illusion of continuity.

Events during the video recording are not based only on human decision making. The light meter and white-balance calculator, automatic focus and other technologies included in the automatic functions of the camera are constantly reacting and readjusting to the changes in the environment caused by weather and wind, time of day and year, passers-by of all species and the actions of the performer. The editing process too — choosing what images not to use and what to use and how to combine them — is interplay (or intra-action) between human choice and the affordances of technology.

The framing of the image, the division into performer and observer and the schedule when to perform are comparable to agential cuts; they clearly make a difference. As Barad states: "Since different agential cuts materialize different phenomena — different marks on bodies — our intra-actions [...] contribute to the differential mattering of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 178). She would not emphasize choice, however, since according to her "[c]uts are agentially enacted not by wilful individuals but by the larger material arrangement of which 'we' are a 'part'." We are responsible for the cuts that we help enact, not because we choose or are being chosen, "but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe" (Barad, 2007). This also means that "'others' are never very far from 'us'; 'they' and 'we' are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts 'we' help to enact", she notes (Barad, 2007, p. 129).

The tree and the swing are co-constituted and entangled in a way that changes over time. Is the branch of the tree that the swing is fastened around part of the swing? If the ropes were left around the branch, they would eventually be enveloped by the growing tree and be covered by lichen living on it. But how could the boundaries between the swing and the swinger change? However much I would feel at one with my surroundings, I am aware of what is part of the tree and what is part of me. How are we co-constituted and entangled, besides our constant exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide?

Perhaps this felt difference between us actually co-constitutes me as a person.

As Barad writes, “[a]gential intra-actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve ‘humans’”, but the point is not only to incorporate “both humans and non-humans into the apparatus of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p. 171). For her “[h]umans do not merely assemble different apparatuses for satisfying particular knowledge projects; they themselves are part of the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (Barad, 2007). She dismisses both humanist and anti-humanist accounts; human subjects do not exist prior to their involvement in natural-cultural practices, nor are they the effects of human-based discursive practices. Human subjects are neither outside observers of apparatuses nor independent subjects that intervene in the workings of apparatuses, she explains, nor are they the products of the social technologies that produce them (Barad, 2007). Subjects and objects are constituted through specific intra-actions, which may range across traditional boundaries between humans and non-humans or between self and other, she notes (Barad, 2007, p. 342). For her “human bodies, like all other bodies, are not entities with inherent boundaries and properties but phenomena that acquire specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 172).

What would this mean in terms of my material-discursive and natural-cultural practice of performing landscape? Does it mean that I too, like the swing or the tree or the sea, acquire specific boundaries and properties through the intra-actions involved? That I change the environment through my actions, like when I create a path in the moss on the cliffs by repeatedly placing the tripod in the same place? That the environment changes me, like when I get concretions in my hands by repeatedly clutching the knots in the rope of the swing? That my ideas of what is an enjoyable temperature or a beautiful view change over time? That I change and transform together with the environment? Yes, indeed.

For Barad, humans are emergent phenomena like all other physical systems: “Parts of the world are always intra-acting with other parts of the world”, she writes, “and it is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being — with boundaries, properties, cause and effect — is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency.” Thus, “to the extent that ‘humans’ emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena, they do so as part of the larger material configuration, or rather the ongoing reconfiguring, of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 338). This does not diminish our responsibility, however, since possibilities for intra-action exist at every moment that “entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad, 2007, p. 235).

For an artistic practice this means, on one hand, responsibility in terms of what to focus on and what to point at, and also to consider the material, affective and discursive effects of the artwork, as

Barbara Bolt has pointed out (Bolt, 2008); but, on the other hand, it also means responsibility for the doing, for the process, i.e., attending to what takes place during the practice, including the unwelcome side-effects.

According to Barad, “[I]earning how to intra-act responsibly as part of the world means understanding that ‘we’ are not the only active beings — though this is never justification for deflecting our responsibility onto others” (Barad, 2007, p. 391). For her, agency is an enactment, not something one has nor an attribute of subjects or objects, and she encourages us “to consider agency as distributed over nonhuman as well as human forms” (Barad, 2007, p. 214).

This distributed agency is evident in the practice of performing landscape. The swing, the swinger, the tree, the branch, the stub, the cliff, the sea — or clouds, snow, leaves, birds and human visitors — are all entangled parts of the same material becoming of the world in the image. And the agents only indirectly visible in the image — like the camera, the tripod, even the boat I row to the island with — have agency, too. In the video imagery, the boundaries between who or what is performing can shift — the tree or the swing can turn into the main actor. In terms of agency, in creating the image, we all have our part in the intra-action.

Barad summarizes her agential realism: “The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering [...] the primary ontological units are not ‘things’ but phenomena — dynamic topological reconfigurings/ entanglements/ relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not ‘words’ but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism *is* agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 141). She defines agency in the following way:

Agency is “doing” or “being” in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices — iterative reconfigurings of topological manifolds of spacetime-matter relations — through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about changing possibilities of change entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. (Barad, 2007, p. 178)

Although this may seem much too complicated in terms of artistic practice, it could make sense. The repeated weekly visits to the same place, intra-acting with the same elements, fastening the swing to the branch, placing the camera on the cliff (with minute variations), could all be understood as “iterative changes to particular practices”. Recording changes in the landscape over the year could be called the registering of “topological manifolds of spacetime-matter relations”. Through this practice of “reconfiguring material-discursive

apparatuses of bodily production,” the changes in the landscape and the constant intra-action of the elements of the environment become evident for the observer-performer and later to other observers, albeit in an altered form.

According to Barad, we are responsible to others we are entangled with through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails. What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us, she claims; agential separability is not individuation. Ethics is not about the right response to a radically exterior/rized other, “but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (Barad, 2007, p. 393). These relationalities are too numerous to keep count of in most cases. This is evident when thinking of connections, as involved in this one example, which are not limited to visiting the island and recording moments in the life of the landscape there, but include all the relations the artworks might engender.

## Agential separability and artistic research

Barad’s idea of agential separability is interesting for artistic research in general, which often involves the entanglement of the subject and object of research. Barad tries to move beyond an epistemological conception of objectivity and replace it with an ontological one: “phenomena do not merely mark the inseparability of observer and observed; rather phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’” (Barad, 2007, pp. 308-309). Furthermore, “[i]ntra-action enacts agential separability — the condition of exteriority-within-phenomena. Separability is not inherent or absolute, but intra-actively enacted relative to a specific phenomenon” (Barad, 2007, p. 339). For Barad “observer” and “observed” are merely two physical systems intra-acting in the marking of the “effect” by the “cause”. Human observers are possible, but not necessary, and objectivity is a matter of “accountability to marks on bodies.” She does not base objectivity on an inherent ontological separability but on an intra-actively enacted agential separability. Moreover, “[t]he reproducibility and unambiguous communication of laboratory results are possible because the agential cut enacts determinate boundaries, properties and meanings as well as the ‘measured object’ (‘cause’) within the phenomenon” (Barad, 2007, p. 340).

In artistic research, no “reproducibility and unambiguous communication of laboratory result” is strived for, although some kind of enacted agential separability could be helpful. The task for an artist-researcher would be, not only to acknowledge her subjectivity and entanglement with the object of research, but to enact some kind of separability with the phenomena at hand, perhaps even to split temporarily into observer and observed, as I do with the help of a camera on a tripod. But does this result in

a situation (criticized by Hannula et al, 2005) where the artist first produces artworks and then becomes a scholar who studies those artworks as if she had not created them, meaning that artistic research would have nothing new or special to offer? Perhaps we could think of the enactment of agential separability as an ongoing process or as a choice of focus: to experiment with and reflect on one aspect of the practice as a method, while leaving other aspects unexamined and “free”.

According to Barad, both experimental and theoretical practices involve intra-acting. For her “experimenting and theorizing are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning... [they] are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of the phenomena produced” (Barad, 2007, p. 56). The same could be said of many art practices, as is evident in practices like performing landscape, where there is no possibility of “stepping outside” the environment (although that has historically been attempted by climbing up mountains to have an overview of the land). This is methodologically important for much artistic research, where the researcher is literally producing phenomena — artworks — and not only observing them. Or, in other words, the entanglement of the subject and object of study in artistic research is merely one obvious example of something that concerns all forms of research or all kinds of engagements with the environment.

“We are not outside observers of the world”, Barad points out. “Neither are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 184). She explicitly states: “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 185). Barad introduces the term *onto-epistem-ology* to describe the study of practices of knowing in being (Barad, 2007). For her knowing is not about ideation nor is it the exclusive birth right of humans. Knowing is rather a physical practice of engagement (Barad, 2007, 342). She summarizes as follows: “Scientific practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest” (Barad, 2007, p. 336). And here we can add: artistic practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest.

The fact that apparatuses are productive of the phenomena they measure does not mean that reality is a product of human concepts, Barad maintains; rather, concepts are specific material arrangements (Barad 2007, p. 334). For her, discourse is not a synonym for language and meaning or intelligibility are not a human-based notions. “Discursive practices are the material conditions for making meaning [...] [and] meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (Barad 2007, p. 335). That ongoing performance of the world I have tried to observe, record, participate in and intra-act with.

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## Appendix

### Swinging with the Snake

During the year of the snake, beginning in the Chinese New Year on 10 February 2013, I fastened a small blue swing onto an aspen that grows on the western shore of Harakka Island, next to the remains of the stone base of an old sauna. More or less once a week, I videoed myself swinging, wearing a light blue scarf, while keeping the position of the camera on a tripod and the framing of the image as constant as possible. On the same occasions, I also sat next to the stub of another aspen that stood nearby, looking out to sea with my back to the camera. And in another image I sat on a small pile of rocks looking at the expanding Helsinki harbour on the opposite shore. Thus I tried to produce "souvenirs" of what the landscape looked like during this year on the northern shore of the Finnish Bay.

*Year of the Snake – Swinging* was the last part in a series of twelve one-year projects performed for the camera on the same island and exploring the question of how to perform landscape today. The series, which I began in 2002, is based on the Chinese calendar and its cycle of twelve years, with each year named after a specific animal. Each year I chose a new perspective on the landscape, a new aspect of the environment and a new kind of relationship between my body and the place. This year I focused on the movement of a small swing,

a manmade element added to the landscape. Although a swing can be an impressive sculptural element — as in the works of Monica Sand, for instance — this swing is on a child's scale. The aspen on the shore is small of stature as well. The swing bore the weight of any visitors without problems, however. I experimented with sharing the experience of swinging and changing the performer in the image, by inviting colleagues from the island as well as temporary visitors to swing for a while. These performances I documented on video and in a trilingual blog, adding a still image from each performance — either of the visitor or of myself — to each blog note. By sharing an activity like swinging in order to end the series, with its focus on showing the passing of time, I chose a more light-hearted note. I took the swing with me on my travels, too, and tied it to trees growing on various shores.

After showing the works for the first time at an exhibition in Muu Gallery (Helsinki) in May 2014, I experimented with inviting people to swing on a number of occasions, and with projecting an edited version of that swinging later onto the same place, among other experiments.

### The following links give an idea of the original project and the works produced as a result

Functioning links to individual works: <<http://annettearlander.com> or <[http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/artists/annette-arlander\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/artists/annette-arlander_en/)>

### For a quick idea of the project, see the following links

Project blog: <<http://aa-yearofthesnake.blogspot.fi>>

Brief screening version of *Year of the Snake – Swinging*: <<https://vimeo.com/88325298>>

Brief version of collective variation of *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (mix) 2014 (3 min. 30 sec.) HD 16:9: <<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-the-snake-swinging-along-mix/>>

### For information on the first exhibition showing these works

Exhibition at Muu Gallery 3 (25 May 2014), including a four-channel installation and some single channel works: <<https://www.facebook.com/events/1497104890509381>> and <<http://www.harakka.fi/arlander/muu-gal-2014/engl.html>>

### Works available for preview by the Distribution Centre for Finnish Media Art

*Year of the Snake – In the Swing* 2014 (16 min. 8 sec.) HD 16:9: <[http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-in-the-swing\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-in-the-swing_en/)>

*Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* 2014 (26 min. 30 sec.) HD 16:9: <<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-along/>>

*Year of the Snake – By the Swing* 2014 (50 min. 41 sec.) HD 16:9: <<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-by-the-swing/>>

*Year of the Snake – Watching the Harbour* 2014 (55 min. 3 sec.) HD 16:9: <<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-watching-the-harbour/>>



<http://artnodes.uoc.edu>

From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape

*Day and Night of the Snake* 2014 (6 min. 46 sec.) HD 16:9:  
 <<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/day-and-night-of-the-snake-swinging/>>

Information about the work (without a preview):

*Year of the Snake – Swinging* (installation) 2014 (36 min. 30 sec.)  
 HD 16:9  
 <[http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-installation\\_en/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-installation_en/)>

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## ARTICLE

**NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”**

# Politics as encounter and response-ability

## Learning to converse with enigmatic others

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**Abstract**

Starting from the question of what the politics of new feminist materialisms could be, this article addresses the possibilities of (re-)conceptualizing the political in terms of encounters and involvedness, but not foremost as a matter of choice and decision but as “the only way you can figure you can stay alive” (Reagon, 1983). In our times of hegemonic anthropocentric rule of the political (Scott, 1999), I see important contributions of new (feminist) materialisms to the challenge of reconsidering our modes of encountering “others” (human and more-than-human), who, without necessarily playing by the rules, are nevertheless agentive forces. Acknowledging our fundamental dependency as living beings enmeshed in human and more-than-human worlds provides ethical grounds for working on modes of encountering “others” that accept and even embrace the fact that our own certainties will not remain stable in the process. I propose a reading of Judith Butler’s anti-foundationalist rethinking of humanist notions of intentionality and political agency (2011) through Karen Barad’s critique of her attribution of matter’s dynamism and historicity solely to the agency of language or culture (2007). I suggest that Butler’s rethinking of political subjectivity can be re-invigorated and sharpened, in light of Barad’s critique (2007), by revisiting Butler’s claim that matter is “a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions”. I argue that this confounds any clear distinction of passivity and activity, thereby enabling a transformation of our understanding of subjectivity and agency in terms of being-with and responding to the enigmatic address of the other (Basile, 2005).

**Keywords**

notions of the political, performativity, new materialism, anthropocentrism, responsibility

## *La política como encuentro y respons-habilidad Aprender a conversar con los otros enigmáticos*

### **Resumen**

*Partiendo de la pregunta de cuál podría ser la política de los nuevos materialismos feministas, este artículo contempla las posibilidades de (re)plantearla en términos de encuentros e implicación, de manera que ya no se basa en elegir y decidir, sino que es «el único modo en que crees que puedes seguir con vida» (Reagon, 1983). En nuestra época de dominio hegemónico antropocéntrico de lo político (Scott, 1999), veo aportaciones importantes de los nuevos materialismos (feministas) al desafío de replantearnos nuestros modos de relacionarnos con los «otros» (humanos y más que humanos), los cuales, sin necesariamente seguir las reglas, constituyen no obstante fuerzas agentivas. Reconocer nuestra dependencia fundamental como seres vivos enredados en mundos humanos y más que humanos ofrece la base ética para trabajar en modos de relacionarse con «otros» que aceptan e incluso adoptan el hecho de que nuestras certezas no permanecerán estables en tal proceso. Propongo interpretar el replanteamiento antifundacionalista que elabora Judith Butler (2011) de las nociones de intencionalidad y agencia política a través de la crítica de Karen Barad (2007), según la cual Butler solamente atribuye dinamismo e historicidad de la materia a la agencia del lenguaje o la cultura. Sugiero reanimar y perfilar el replanteamiento de la subjetividad política de Butler a través de la crítica de Barad (2007), cuando revisa la afirmación de Butler de que la materia es «aquello que provoca y ocasiona». Argumento que esta afirmación impide distinguir claramente entre pasividad y actividad, por lo que permite modificar nuestra comprensión de la subjetividad y agencia en términos de «estar con» y responder al tratamiento enigmático del otro (Basile, 2005).*

### **Palabras clave**

*nociones de lo político, performatividad, nuevo materialismo, antropocentrismo, responsabilidad*

What is the politics of new feminist materialisms?<sup>1</sup> And what new notions of politics emerge in these debates? These are pressing questions as yet unanswered; perhaps they will never be answered in a definitive sense but, rather, arise as questions that keep any notion of politics and political agency open and unstable. New feminist materialisms pose serious challenges to rethink notions and practices that “we” conceive of as “political”. In particular, they challenge the anthropocentric conceit implied in an understanding of the political as the pinnacle of human exceptionality: the ability to transform and shape the (social) world. Starting from these questions and challenges, this paper addresses the possibilities of (re)conceptualizing the political in terms of encounters and involvedness, and not foremost as a matter of choice and decision, but as a necessity.

In engaging with the challenges of the new materialisms with respect to the question of politics, however, the critique of anthropocentrism, in

particular, needs further elaboration. In order to be distinguishable from other agencies and transformative forces, politics is, by definition, an anthropocentric notion that implies specific human agents who strive to shape and transform the conditions in which they live. This in turn implies that politically active agents are subjects who, to a certain extent, are aware of their particular needs and motives, who have a political will and political intentions. They can set goals and define the means to achieve them; furthermore, the conditions of possibility of such political (trans)formations are given by the assumption that the world is *socially* constituted. Political action is the activity of subjects who perceive of problems as *social* problems and assume that they have the ability and maybe also the duty to actively fashion the world they live in in order to solve or diminish these problems.

New materialisms take issue with the anthropocentrism of these suppositions, thus challenging assumptions and taken-for-granted

1. It is still to be established whether and to what extent it is justified to speak of new materialism as a new perspective (van der Tuin, 2011; Coole, 2013). I prefer, for the moment at least, to speak of new materialisms in plural in order to emphasize openness and heterogeneity. Common ground for the rather heterogeneous debates assembled under the label of new materialism can be found in paying attention to the agentive dynamism of matter and the critical reflection that the becoming of the world is not exclusively an effect of cultural inscriptions or human activity.

certainties concerning the political. The focus on the social as the politically amenable dimension of reality is perceived as a *retreat from materiality*, as a lack of attentiveness to the agency and historicity of the material. New materialisms strive to rearticulate the notion of politics as an *engagement with matter*. It is, however, not nearly as clear as it may seem at first glance what the term *matter* actually refers to and *who* engages with this matter — and on whose terms. As I will argue, it is important to acknowledge the situatedness of “our” notions of the political in order to re-imagine these notions from within and against.

## Situating the notion of politics

The question of who engages with matter and on whose terms points to the necessity of taking into account other critical interventions in and within notions of the political. As postcolonial critics have shown, the genealogy of modern political rationality cannot be traced without accounting for imperialist encounters. As David Scott argues, the colonial regimes implemented specific rules in “a new game of politics” (Scott 1999, p. 45), a game that obliged anyone who aspired to political action to play by its rules. Even more: part of the rules of the game required the systematic disabling of other forms of life “by systematically breaking down their conditions and constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable — indeed, so as to oblige — new forms of life to come into being” (Scott, 1999, p. 26).

The assumption that our world can be actively arranged, transformed, fashioned — the very basis of our notions of politics — is deeply implicated in these historical conditions. Modern power is fundamentally about the decentralized organization of the conditions of life and, as Michel Foucault’s analyses have taught us, the self-determined subject who experiences innate desires and intentions as the origin of (potentially rational) political agency is a vital element of this decentralized organization of modern power (Foucault, 1982). Modern power is about the production of subjects and the governing of their conduct, in order to achieve conditions under which these subjects strive to govern themselves in particularly productive ways. Part and parcel of this particular regime of power is its drive to globally transform and define the conditions of life and subjectivities: “The political problem of modern colonial power was [...] not merely to contain resistance and encourage accommodation but to seek to ensure that *both* could *only* be defined in relation to the categories and structures of modern political rationalities” (Scott, 1999, p. 52).

For projects referring to the re-articulation of notions and practices of politics, this means that modern subjectivity is, paradoxically, both the object of critique as well as the means of resistance to power relations. This historical form of subjectivity configures contemporary frameworks for the intelligibility of the human; it is foundational for juridical notions of rights and also for political demands and

it is constitutively implicated in the formation of civil society. The conditions of possibility for political agency and transformative action are structured by modern power-knowledge regimes.

Postcolonial critique converges with new materialist critique in the challenge to acknowledge and account for the constitutive role of “others” — who cannot not or do not want to comply with hegemonic rules of the political, who, without playing by these rules, are, nevertheless, agentive forces. In our times of hegemonic, globalized rules of the political “we” need to reconsider our modes of encountering marginalized or even abject “others” as contemporary forms of being in the world, of creating specific forms of life, ethical subjectivity and sociability. With this brief reference to postcolonial debates in an article focused on new materialist challenges to the notion of the political, my intention is to stress that human/non-human is not the only distinction at stake in critical challenges to notions of the political. Or, rather, if we focus exclusively on this distinction, we risk reinstating euro-centric notions of humanity/human subjectivity by implicitly equating them with “the human”. If it is not clearly specified who (“we”?) is/are engaging in a problematization of the human/non-human dualism, then this non-specification implies a universal notion of humanity that inadvertently reestablishes the West-centered humanism (Schueller, 2009, p. 237) it purports to overcome.

This means that we need to be careful of an “effortless use of the ‘we’” (Ahuja, 2010, p. 131), while at the same time acknowledging that we cannot simply abandon the subjectivity implied in this “we”. In a way, we, who are discussing these questions in the setting of late modern academia, are stuck as and with this human subject. We are living in a world which is shaped, in many ways, by agents who presume to act as rational human beings striving to know, to shape and even control their (passive) environment. These presumptions of technological mastery are not simply idle delusions; they have powerful material effects, they have materialized in the historical ontology of our present; they have become part of the living fabric of our material being. These material effects are here to be dealt with through political attempts at transformation, and late modern human subjectivity constitutes “our” conditions of making possible such transformative agency.

This is perhaps a slightly fatalistic argument as to why we need to hold on, at least provisionally, to certain presumptions regarding human subjectivity. There is also, however, an emancipatory line of reasoning, which takes up the traditions of historical materialism with its political commitment of making visible, or making accessible, the fact that human activity is a positive force in the constitution of reality. Marx built this argument in his analysis of capitalism in order to make it conceivable that certain structures constituted by the capitalist mode of production are effects of human practices and can thus be transformed by cooperative human agency. His aim was to displace naturalist explanations of labour, resources, economic rationalities, and so forth, in order to open the way for emancipatory

agency. And this insistence that the capitalist mode of production is an effect of human agency and can thus be transformed by collective practices is still an historical necessity of our times. It is a necessary counterpoint to the neoliberal dogma that economic processes elude human knowledge and should be left to (effectively naturalized) market dynamics (Mirowski, 2010).

## A more crowded picture

We are thus faced with a conundrum of sorts. We are in and of an historical situation in which we need to hold on to the human subject in order to radically question this same subject. As Donna Haraway put it: “I think ‘we’ – that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history – need something called humanity. It is the kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called ‘that which we cannot not want’” (Haraway, 2004, p. 49).

This entanglement with/in what we are criticizing means we have to think of the re-articulation of politics as a process from within: transforming conditions through the means provided by those conditions. This leads to an understanding of politics as performativity, as politics *from within and against* (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). The notion of performativity is a pivotal concept in Karen Barad’s engagement with Judith Butler’s work and, in particular, in her attempts to push debates beyond the realm of human agency. Butler’s concern is foremost with human subjects, or to be more precise, with ways that normative boundaries define the notion of the human subject and constitute particular subjects by marginalizing and excluding others. Barad is critical of Butler’s focus on human subjectivity and urges us to go beyond the realm of the human. But, as I read her, Barad does not abandon the notion of the human subject as such; her point is to push the concept of performativity into “a much more crowded picture in which [human subjects] are unlikely to be the sole elements under analysis” (Bell, 2012, p. 22).

While Butler is concerned with the possibilities of rethinking intentionality and (political) agency in a posthumanist account of human subjectivity, Barad is pointing to new possibilities of responsiveness to “others” by rejecting the reduction of the notion of agency to human intentionality or subjectivity. Barad’s crucial argument is that “matter plays an agentive role in its iterative materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 177). Barad is critical of Butler’s “exclusive focus on human bodies and social factors, which works against her efforts to understand the relationship between materiality and discursivity in their indissociability” (Barad, 2007, p. 34).

In Barad’s reading, this focus on human bodies and social factors “ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 151). To make this point, Barad refers to a passage in *Bodies that Matter* where Butler proposes

that the materiality of the body “is a demand in and for language, a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions, [...] calls to be explained, described, diagnosed, altered or [...] fed, exercised, mobilized, put to sleep, a site of enactments and passions of various kinds. [...] [N]ot the blank slate or passive medium upon which the psyche acts, but, rather, the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action from the start” (Butler, 2011, p. 37).

Barad concedes that Butler offers an alternative to theories of social constructivism by emphasizing the importance of the constitutive outside, of that which has to be excluded in order to attain discursive intelligibility. Her critical questions point to the problem of accounting for the agentive role of materiality with this focus on the linguistic dimension of processes of materialization. Barad reasons that “while Butler correctly calls for the recognition of matter’s historicity, ironically, she seems to assume that it is ultimately derived (yet again) from the agency of language or culture. She fails to recognize matter’s dynamism.” (Barad, 2007, p. 65).

Butler is indeed concerned with the constitutive agency of language — but is not negating the possibility of other agencies. In particular, she is interested in the bodily and psychic agencies of the unacceptable, the dynamism of the spectral presence of that which is excluded by the order of intelligibility. As I read her in this context, her point is that “our” possibilities of acknowledging these dynamics are configured and constrained by language. The ensuing question is, then, how we can rework our conceptual approach to the domains of the unintelligible in order to learn to engage in actual conversations with unintelligible “others”.

Butler’s focus is clearly on the linguistic apparatus that partakes in the constitution of bodies as sexed bodies. However, I see no necessary dichotomy of activity and passivity or of cause and effect in her argument. Indeed, her claim — that materiality might be conceptualized as “a demand in and for language, a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions” (Butler, 2011, p. 36) — confounds any clear distinction of passivity and activity. The prompting and occasioning can be seen as an activity, a “triggering impact of an enigmatic other” (Basile, 2005, p. 17). Butler is thinking from the standpoint of a human subject, but she is trying to conceptualize the ways in which this subject is solicited and animated by an “other”. In a recent text, Butler refers to Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of occasion, describing it as a curious interaction: “[S]ince both subject and object are animated in relation to one another, some dimension of each is brought forth through the solicitation of the other, and in this sense, the aliveness of each is dependent on a certain provocation coming from the other” (Butler, 2012, p. 4).

This adds another layer to Butler’s work on fundamental relationality and constitutive dependency, taking it beyond the confines of human relations. It remains conceptualized from the standpoint of a human subject or from the standpoint of a humanly structured world (Butler, 2012, p. 5). But it clearly contains the insight that subject

and object are not separable in any definite way. We are immersed, constitutively enmeshed, in more-than-human worlds; we act “in the midst of being acted on” (Butler, 2012, p. 8). As Butler concludes: “[i]f one were to rethink performativity within these terms, then it would be important to try to understand this strange way we are acted on, solicited, brought out, provoked, and how what we call our acting or our doing is itself always in some ways a response to what precedes and enables our action. The performative theory of action has to be resituated in a relational understanding of living organisms, human and non-human, to understand both what sustains life and what imperils it” (Butler, 2012, p. 16)

## The risk of response-ability

The risk of response-ability indicates possibilities of further engagement with Karen Barad's work on rearticulating our understanding of performativity and responsibility as not confinable to the human subject: “Responsibility is not ours alone. [...] Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then” (Barad, 2007, p. 394). Responsibility and accountability are thus opened to reworking; the central connotation is no longer an imperative of taking charge and giving reasons but, rather, an ability to respond to “others”. Responsibility is re-imagined as an ethical injunction to work on the ability to respond to “others”, to take care of the entanglements of our relationalities — and this implies that response-ability is tied to processes of *becoming different* in/through the response. This notion of responsibility implies a solidarity that is not based on proximity and similarity but on being-in-this-together. As Bernice Johnson Reagon pointed out in her presentation at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981, the twentieth century is marked by technological developments that brought about the “possibility of making sure that no human being in the world would be unreached”, bringing us “to the end of a time where you can have a space that is ‘yours only’ — just for the people you want to be there” (Reagon, 1983, p. 357).

From our perspective at the beginnings of the twenty-first century, this impossibility of isolating (ostensibly) homogenous human societies is even further complicated by the impossibility to clearly demarcate human individuals as separable from a non-human environment. Acknowledging the constitutive dependency given by our entangled existence with/in human and more-than-human “others” urges us to re-imagine the concept of agency. It also urges us to re-imagine the political as an open-ended process of continuous learning and un-learning (Spivak, 1985). This also means accepting the political as the necessary failure to ever achieve a definite goal; and, importantly, the political no longer appears as a matter of choice and decision, but of connection, of encounter and of involvedness: “You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would

consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive” (Reagon, 1983, p. 356-357).

In a world of global interdependence we cannot avoid being-together with “others”. We have to acknowledge that in our historical present these relations of being together are, in many ways, systematically hierarchical and violent. Conceiving of this violence in terms of *social* power relations makes it possible to imagine political agency as a transformative force to achieve “a better world, a liveable world, a world based on values of co-flourishing and mutuality” (Barad, 2011, p. 450). But the necessary re-imagining of the political means a re-imagining of transformative activity. Reagon succinctly points to the risk involved in such politics: “Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing” (Reagon, 1983, p. 356). Re-imagining the political means being prepared to radically question who we are and what we can be as human subjects. This is not a comfortable task but — and this is an ethical injunction to which new materialisms add new layers — it is a necessity.

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## ARTICLE

**NODE: "NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY"****On difference that makes a difference  
and how some things come to matter and  
others don't****Political agency and subjectivity  
in Karen Barad's feminist new materialism****Franziska Aigner**

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**Abstract**

The following essay is a critical investigation into the political within feminist new materialisms. Agency, identity and subjectivity are complexified in new materialist theories, although not entirely done away with. They are understood as the complex product of a material-discursive, nature-cultural web of relations from which a feminist political subjectivity might emerge in its always situated and situational instantiations. However, while feminist new materialisms offer complex insights into the transient nature of boundary drawing practices, destabilizing binary conceptualizations of subject and object, matter and discourse and the like, our focus in this article is on how such complexifications can ground a feminist politics proper, in particular concerning the work of feminist quantum physicist and philosopher Karen Barad. Using the conceptual tools developed by Peta Hinton (2014) and Catherine Malabou (2011), our argumentation works through Barad's notions of objectivity, accountability, agency and subjectivity. At the core of the article lies the question of whether Barad's realist notion of

objectivity and accountability could allow for the recognition of commonalities and common histories in cuts and marks left on bodies in order to bring forth a certain kind of feminist (potentially collective) identity that could think and work towards political change. By working through the complementarity principle developed by Niels Bohr and its further elaboration by Karen Barad, the argument points at the conceptual problems arising from the complementarity of “truth and meaning” for envisaging political subjectivity. Rather than working towards resolving or collapsing the conceptual and material problematic of complementarity, a conclusion is drawn by thinking through Barad’s grounding of agency and processes of materialization, bearing in mind Malabou’s notion of plasticity and her call for a minimal concept of female essence, with the idea being to craft material-discursive apparatuses that could enable the tracing of a politics based on embodied historicities of matter.

### Keywords

situated subjectivity, agency, accountability, violence, historicity, plasticity

*Sobre la diferencia que marca la diferencia, y sobre cómo algunas cosas llegan a importar y materializarse, y otras no. Agencia política y subjetividad en el nuevo materialismo feminista de Karen Barad*

### Resumen

*El siguiente artículo es una investigación crítica sobre lo político en los nuevos materialismos feministas. La agencia, la identidad y la subjetividad se vuelven más complejas en las teorías del nuevo materialismo, aunque no se eliminan del todo. Se entienden como el producto complejo de una red de relaciones material y discursiva, natural y cultural, de la que podría surgir una subjetividad política feminista representada por ejemplos siempre situados y situacionales. No obstante, mientras los nuevos materialismos feministas ofrecen perspectivas complejas respecto a la naturaleza efímera de las prácticas que establecen límites, desestabilizando conceptualizaciones binarias del sujeto y el objeto, la materia y el discurso y aspectos similares, nuestro artículo se centra en cómo tales complejidades pueden fundamentar una política feminista propiamente dicha, particularmente vinculada a la obra de la física cuántica y filósofa Karen Barad.*

*Empleando las herramientas conceptuales desarrolladas por Peta Hinton (2014) y Catherine Malabou (2011), nuestra argumentación recorre las nociones de Barad de objetividad, responsabilidad, agencia y subjetividad. En este artículo radica la cuestión de si las nociones realistas de objetividad y responsabilidad que presenta Barad permitirían el reconocimiento de cosas en común y relatos comunes en los cortes y marcas dejados en los cuerpos. Así, podría generarse un cierto tipo de identidad feminista (potencialmente colectiva), planteada y orientada hacia el cambio político. Al repasar el principio de complementariedad desarrollado por Niels Bohr y su elaboración posterior a manos de Karen Barad, la argumentación señala los problemas conceptuales que surgen de la complementariedad entre la «verdad» y el «significado» para concebir la subjetividad política. En vez de resolver o erradicar la problemática conceptual y material de la complementariedad, se extraen conclusiones mediante la fundamentación de Barad de agencia y de procesos de materialización. Asimismo se tiene en cuenta la noción de plasticidad de Malabou y su exigencia de un concepto mínimo de la esencia femenina, con el objetivo de elaborar aparatos materiales y discursivos que permitirían basar la política en historicidades encarnadas de la materia.*

### Palabras clave

*subjetividad situada, agencia, responsabilidad, violencia, historicidad, plasticidad*

## Introduction

The promise of new materialisms for feminist theory seems to be nothing less than providing ontological and scientific grounds for deconstructing old binaries. The relational ontologies in question complexify our understanding of agency and history, time and change, identity and difference; furthermore, by accounting for their historical and material-discursive emergence, they displace received notions of matter and discourse, nature and culture, sex and gender. If, on the one hand, such a shift clearly facilitates a feminist onto-epistemology, on the other hand, it is less obvious how this complexification can ground a feminist politics proper. When the boundaries of subject and object, matter and discourse and the like are destabilized, what is left of political agency? How can we think a feminist political subjectivity? With these and similar questions in mind we wish to tackle the work of Karen Barad. We want to enquire how her specific new materialist onto-epistemology, which she terms *agential realism*, enables us to conceptualize (political) change. How does it influence our thinking of difference and what becomes of feminist political subjectivity after her relational re-reading of objectivity and subjectivity? In other words, can her re-reading of agency, objectivity and subjectivity at the quantum level be relevant for rethinking a feminist politics, concerned with power relations?

In order to address these questions, we will look at how Barad's work responds to Haraway's quest for "situated knowledges" and how it enable us to tackle its deadlocks as drawn out by Peta Hinton. Furthermore, we wish to read Barad's relational reading of agency, difference, accountability and history in relation to Catherine Malabou's work on plasticity and her quest for a minimal concept of female essence. We would argue that Malabou's work, engaged as it is with neuroscience and psychoanalysis, on one hand, and continental philosophy (particularly Hegel), on the other hand (although in no way programmatically associated with feminist new materialisms), reworks received notions in an akin manner, while explicitly thinking the stakes of such a reworking in relation to classical notions of violence, power, political agency and subjectivity. By bringing together such disparate feminist philosophers, we wish to draw out the conditions for a contemporary conceptualization of a situated feminist subjectivity and the meaningful differences this can bring about..

## Feminist subjectivity, female essence and plasticity

In the article *Situated Knowledges and New Materialism(s): Rethinking a Politics of Location*, Peta Hinton (2014, pp. 99-113) conceptualizes an annunciative politics— rather than enunciative— through a critical re-reading of the notion of subjectivity put forth in *Situated Knowledges* by Haraway (1991, pp. 575-599). Hinton's annunciative

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politics is a response to the paradox she ascribes to a feminist "politics of location": "Feminists are faced with the difficult task of addressing the essentialist manoeuvres that supposedly accompany demands for a politics of inclusion or visibility, 'yet this demand can [...] only ever be brought about by emphasizing precisely the specificity of (sexual) difference(s)', with the risk of both undermining its (more) democratic agendas and reintroducing the essentialism being addressed. Reading this 'problem of difference' into a politics of location, the key issue that emerges here is that its reconfiguring of subjectivity disrupts the capacity to secure the identity of woman in any straightforward manner, while at the same time it requires something of this identity in order to ground its political aspirations."

Tracing an analogous paradox in the tension in situated knowledges between objectivity and locatability, universality and situatedness, knowledge and embodiment, Hinton does not opt for resolving it, but rather proposes an annunciative politics as a two-way movement: the subject's attempt to situate herself, as well as the process of being situated (Hinton, 2014, p. 108). Hinton proposes this as the founding movement of a feminist politics, that "[...] can be seen to perform a violence of sorts, but this violence [...] appears necessary if feminism is to have any purchase" (Hinton, 2014, p. 111).

Hinton's insistence on the necessity of conceptualizing a female identity for a feminist politics resonates with Malabou's points made in her book *Changing Difference* (Malabou, 2011). She argues for a plastic and minimal notion of female essence as the grounds for a feminist politics: "I propose a minimal concept for woman, an 'ineffaceable' remains in which 'woman' refers to a subject overexposed to a specific kind of violence. This violence can be defined as a dual constraint or schizoid pressure: the pressure of work in society and at home. This minimal concept – woman's overexposure to dual exploitation – is the remainder, burning and plastic, with which we must work" (Malabou, 2011, pp. 3-4). Malabou's minimal concept of woman is implicitly one that is both situated by and situating itself. On the one hand, woman is situated by a specific kind of violence, which she has to endure as the dual exploitation of work in and outside the home. At the same time, she is situating herself in a specific way — reclaiming this minimal concept of woman based on a history of violence— by refusing to give into a total deconstruction of the feminine, which would result in the dissolution of (sexual or any other) differences towards an undifferentiated stream of meaningless differentiations. Differences and different locations have meaning precisely because there are different kinds of violence they have to endure. Malabou, in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (2008), Malabou articulates the problem of meaningful difference against a meaningless flux of endless differentiations as the contrast between a plastic notion of brain and/as subjectivity versus a flexible one: "To ask 'What should we do with our brain?' is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient

individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile. [...] To exist is to be able to change difference while respecting the difference of change: the difference between continuous change without limits, without adventure, without negativity and a formative change that tells an effective story and proceeds by ruptures, conflicts, dilemmas” (Malabou, 2008, p. 79).

While in this essay flexibility is understood primarily as the paradigm of neoliberal flexible subjectivity — celebrating endless meaningless differentiation and self-differentiation as the self-styling and self-fashioning of endlessly young and available precarious subjects — we can see how the conceptual problem behind flexibility and plasticity is akin to that of a radical deconstruction of female essence or a radical anti-essentialism, often resulting in a very naïve appropriation of Butler’s idea of the performativity of gender as an “anything goes” of self-gendering at will. To put it in Hinton’s terms: if we refuse to reclaim any kind of female identity and subjectivity, even though a highly complexified and relational one, if we merely affirm the singular epistemic legitimacy of any kind of location, then any location is equal to another. They are all different and precisely because of that, there is no (politically meaningful) difference between them. Being situated in a certain way becomes merely an empirical fact; and the act of situating oneself becomes equivalent to a choice based on personal tastes, modifiable at will, which leaves no room for a normative grounding of objectivity or political agency — for differentiating among differences and accounting for their meaning.

Malabou’s elaboration of a minimal concept of woman is a response to what she understands to be the basic misunderstanding behind such radically anti-essentialist feminist agendas, which promote the flexibility of endless differentiation: they conceive of essence as being determined as a fixed substance and a given biology (sex), as well as being normatively imposed on a social level (gender). Malabou (2011) warns us, on the contrary, that essence, already in Hegel, was conceived as essentially plastic: as a form enduring (and giving itself) ever new formations. In the same vein, her notion of gender in terms of essence is conceptualized as a complex interplay between biology, ontology, culture and history, an interplay which is *essentially* plastic: “We must rethink the relation of philosophy and science today [...] always according to the hypothesis of the originary transformability of presence and nature [...]. To construct one’s identity is a process that can only be a development of an original biological malleability, a first transformability. If sex were not plastic, there would be no gender. If something would not be offered for transformation in the natural and anatomical determination of sex, then identity construction would not be possible [...]. Transformability is at work from the start, it trumps all determination. Everything starts with metamorphosis” (Malabou, 2011, p. 98).

The minimal concept of female essence based on a history of violent plasticity is thus, for Malabou, not merely a political necessity, but a notion that gives a feminist politics empirical grounding. Recognition

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of the “specific kind of violence” female subjects endure is implied in Malabou’s conceptualization of the plastic nature of the female or any other essence: plasticity itself as an ontological process is a violent operation. It de-forms what has been formed and creates new forms, always on the layers of previous plastic operations. This gives us a complex understanding of the intricacy of freedom and determinism: the given is the product of a history of transformations, while at the same time limits and enables further transformative processes.

We can see how such a rendering of the complex intricacy of ontology and history in Malabou complicates received notions of agency, subjectivity and identity, in a way analogous to that which Peta Hinton ascribes directly to Haraway and indirectly to Karen Barad. Hinton suggests that the double-gesture of situating oneself and being situated is an anticipation of the politics behind new materialist thinkers, particularly Karen Barad. Agency, identity and subjectivity are not done away with but are complexified in new materialist theories: they are understood as the complex product of a material-discursive, nature-cultural web of relations from which a feminist political subjectivity might emerge in its always situated and situational instantiations. Wishing to reclaim a feminist politics and, hence, a feminist political subjectivity that could bring about meaningful difference, we would like to investigate Barad’s notions of objectivity, accountability, agency and subjectivity. Do these notions allow an account of histories of practices of marking, which could produce particular kinds of subjects that could situate themselves as a “we”? Do her notions allow such a recognition of the regularity and commonality of these processes of marking — of the sort Malabou has in mind when she writes about a specific kind of violence endured by women — as the basis for a minimal concept of female essence?

## Agential realism and the political: intelligibility and accountability

Let us now turn to how these political concerns could be conceptualized through Karen Barad’s agential realism. The political in Barad can be understood as a set of practices and apparatuses that materially and discursively individuate political subjects vis-à-vis their others. While the political subject is thus de-naturalized in the absence of inherent boundaries, this does not mean that, for Barad, anything can be understood as a political agent. Political agents emerge out of a complex set of practices, which, even though not determining, are still reinforcing. In order to understand who and what gets endowed with political agency, we need to inquire into how components partially individuate within intra-actions and how agency is conceptualized.

Thinking with Barad, we are always already involved in modes and ways of being and, therefore, implicitly committed to a surrounding world from which we come to act and which constrains our actions. This is what Hinton would call our situatedness, the specific locations

we find ourselves in and intra-act with, how we become what we are through intra-actions and our entanglement within the environment, with the world as an apparatus. Apparatuses are conceptualized by Barad as open-ended material-discursive practices that nonetheless produce differences that matter. But how can we think these differences that matter and who/what defines what a relevant difference is?

To think in that way, we need to account for how agency might result and give rise to meaningful differentiation. Joseph Rouse, drawing on Brandom, uses the notion of selective environments, which actively “shape my surrounding as a field of possible actions in which something is at stake in what I do and help determine whether those stakes can be fulfilled” (Rouse, 2012, p. 260). Only if my actions intra-act relevantly with the actions of others, and also in combination with the affordances of our common environment, can these intra-actions come to matter — as opposed to fail to exhibit significant intelligibility and to materialize. Agency can neither be understood as something that any one subject, apparatus or relata has, and neither can it be imposed from outside the particular phenomenon in question. This account of agency corresponds to how Barad delineates it as being located in the “[...] space of possibilities opened up by indeterminacies entailed in exclusions” (Barad, 2007, p. 182). It is in this respect that intra-actions have to be understood as open-ended patterns of existing and possible intra-actions and not as particular and contained. “The space of possibilities does not represent a fixed event horizon within which the social location of knowers can be mapped, nor does it represent a homogeneous, fixed, uniform container of choices” (Barad, 2007, p. 246). Rather, Barad describes agency as an inexhaustible liveliness which resonates with Malabou’s metamorphosing qualities of plasticity. Neither agency nor plasticity can ever arrive once and for all at one single repeating behaviour, as the historicity of matter in the form of previous intra-actions is infolded in present materializations that reinforce but never foreclose agency once and for all. “The past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter’s iterative becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 181).

While plasticity undoes what has been, moulds old forms and creates new ones, Barad’s agential cut cuts both together and apart and enables the marking of the measuring agencies by the measured object. Both Malabou’s plasticity and Barad’s agency are violent operations to a certain degree. In passing let us note that there might be a kind of ontologization of violence in both thinkers that might endanger the political project of opposing certain kinds of systemic and inter-personal violence. On what grounds can we differentiate between, on the one hand, the violence endured by women that makes for their situatedness and, on the other hand, the violence at work when situating oneself in order to enable political action? How can we normatively ground our decision to engage politically one kind

of violence against the other? We could offer an ontological criteria for their distinction, i.e. in terms of Spinoza’s distinction between affects: joyful affects that increase a body’s power to act, its agency and plasticity versus sad affects that decrease a body’s power to act, even against what Malabou calls a complete disaffection, the loss of the possibility to affect and be affected as the contemporary mode of operation of power. But the problem is perhaps ill-posed, if we interpret it in terms of “choosing” between one kind of violence against another. After the dispersion of agency in Malabou and Barad, choice ends up being a useful concept for accounting for how a certain kind of violence makes us situated so that we can only resist — if we do resist — through a second act of violence which constitutes a feminist subject.

Returning to Barad, we have to think how violent plastic operations and cuts give rise to the intelligibility and objectivity of the marks left on bodies to account for different kinds of violence. This could lead us towards accounting for the iterability of processes of materialization and, therefore, towards thinking whether it is possible to conceptualize a recurrence of practices of marking which would allow us to ground political agency in shared experience. To see, for instance, whether Barad’s framework enables an informed account of how subjects are gendered through material-discursive apparatuses — that is, what specific kind of (de)formative violence they are situated by in their being gendered — we need to turn to how Barad conceptualizes the intelligibility of marks left on bodies.

Intelligibility is configured via normative differential responsiveness (Barad, 2007, p. 380). Intra-actions become intelligible if they are iterative and reproducible under particular circumstances even though they do not arrive at a final regularity. Sticking to the objective referent which is the phenomenon, the practices of registering positions, refining and differentiating marks left on the measuring agency need to take place within the phenomenon. The possibility to refine and reconfigure measurements and apparatuses of bodily production is constitutive of the ability for pattern recognition within any one phenomenon, onto-epistemologically entangling intelligibility and the possibility for change. To put it in Hinton’s words, the inquiry into the given as that which one is situated by is enabled by the possibility of changing it, of situating oneself.

Let us now turn to the very motion of self-situating and investigate it in relation to Barad’s agential realism, by thinking Barad’s apparatus as a possible prosthetically extended (potentially human) political subject, staying truthful to Barad’s post-humanist commitment. According to Barad, measurement instruments are not classical apparatuses, they do not have inherent boundaries and neither do they ontologically pre-exist their particular intra-actions (Barad, 2007, p. 146). However, agential cuts enable exteriority-within-phenomena, through which apparatuses — including a possible political subject — become describable as mixtures or separate components in so-called “classical” terms. Even though spatially separable, the relata of the phenomenon remain ontologically entangled, in fact it is their very

intra-action which allows marks to be left on bodies and subsequently allows for their accountability and objectivity.

In order to approach accountability, we need to look carefully at how the material and the discursive mutually implicate one another in agential intra-actions. In a scientific experiment, concepts only become meaningful with reference to a particular physical apparatus (Barad, 2007, p. 474). For instance, the concept of “position” only has determinate meaning with reference to an apparatus with fixed parts that can actually measure position, as explained by both Bohr and Barad. However, such materially embodied concepts must be understood as being normative, since neither the term nor the concept of position are (universal) self-explanatory notions for Barad, but acquire their meaning only by being involved in particular practices: “[...] an apparatus with internally fixed components does not measure momentum, but only because it fails to indicate momentum by distinct marks” (Rouse, 2012, p. 287). At the same time, the material is folded back into the discursive, because measurements require descriptions in order to be significant. A material mark needs to be involved in a chain of performances (uses of the term “position”, for instance), which are “appropriate” expressions of the concept position (Rouse, 2012, p. 287). The system holding certain uses of concepts normatively accountable to materializations is the same system that produces their definiteness as concepts. Accountability for Barad, therefore, emerges through iterative material-discursive intra-actions; and both the recognizability of patterns of mattering, as well as their accountability, are located within the phenomena in question. Accountability turns out to be based on the ontologically embedded possibility of objective knowledge of the world; it is not dependent on human subjects or political collectives alone, following from Barad’s post-humanist commitment. This notion of objectivity exhibits the extent of Barad’s realist commitment as she writes: “Objectivity [...] is about being accountable and responsible to what is real” (Barad, 2007, p. 340).

Let us now question how and if Barad’s realist notion of objectivity and accountability could allow for the recognition of commonalities and common histories in cuts and marks in order to bring forth a certain kind of feminist (potentially collective) identity that could think and work towards political change. In order to approach this question, we need to further our understanding of the ontological possibility for intelligibility within intra-actions, since change and intelligibility are mutually entangled. Intelligibility can occur in two ways, due to the complementarity principle developed by Niels Bohr in an attempt to make sense of the wave-particle paradox. Bohr’s principle states that the wave and particle behaviours of photons and electrons are ontologically not simultaneously determinate — not only simultaneously un-knowable as proposed by Werner Heisenberg (Barad, 2007, p. 106). Furthermore, the measuring agencies are complementary to the measured object. The measuring system cannot take account of its full entanglement with the object under investigation

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and neither can it take itself into account. In order to enquire about the measuring system itself, we would need to entangle it with a further apparatus, which would produce a different phenomenon. Both of these measurements, however, are not determinate at the same time, since they require two materially exclusive experimental set-ups (Barad, 2007, p. 347).

Thinking the complementarity principle in relation to a political subject describable in classical terms, we can say that it can measure the marks of the location imprinting itself on the apparatus. This measurement constitutes the “truth” (Rouse, 2012, p. 148) of the mark in relation to the environment, but only in reference to the particular phenomenon. The “meaning” of this mark, however, cannot be measured by the same experimental set-up, since the only determinate concepts available are those that are well-defined by the phenomenon in question. We cannot help ourselves to concepts not embodied within the particular set-up, since their meaning would be non-determinate, ideational and abstract within the phenomenon in question. We could take other notions and concepts into account if we were to exit the quantum framework for a different methodology in order to allow for the determination of the meaning of marks left on bodies. This would be the moment to re-introduce a classical subject, for instance, or to take recurrence to a language antecedently understood. If we want to remain within the quantum framework, however, and would like to undo this locality — with the intention of accounting for the political, ethical, epistemic and ontological meaning of the particular measurement as well as accounting for how it differs from others — we have to entangle the first apparatus with a subsequent one. In this motion, the first apparatus will now be treated quantum-mechanically as the object under investigation, which will again be complementary to the subsequent apparatus. This means that the truth of any one mark related to its surrounding and the meaning of that mark in relation to other marks are not simultaneously determinate but are complementary. This has both epistemological and ontological ramifications, since truth and meaning require two materially exclusive apparatuses that ontologically materialize different subjects and objects, each bound up with issues of accountability and responsibility only within and as part of the particular phenomenon.

Concluding our thoughts for now, we can say that what would be needed for agential realism to provide a theoretical ground for a feminist politics is to investigate the relation between “truth” and “meaning” within the quantum framework. In the absence of a methodology of thinking the two together, any apparatus and, with it, the prosthetically extended (potentially human) political subject can only know herself through the marks left on the body by the entangled environment, yet it cannot account for itself nor its entanglement with this environment, nor for the meaning of the marks left on its body. Rather uncannily, this observation corresponds with Malabou’s remark on female essence: “[woman] cannot define herself except through the violence done to her. Violence alone confers her being” (Malabou,

2011, p. 98) In the absence of an apparatus accounting for the relation between truth and meaning, this violence cannot be understood as a systemic violence particular to woman, but is exploded out into infinite locations with infinite differences without the ability to investigate overlaps, entanglements and mutual implications.

An apparatus that could account for the relation between two complementary intra-actions has become thinkable since the quantum eraser experiment initially performed by Scully *et al.* (1982), who crafted an apparatus that was said to be able to “erase” the which-path information of particles going through a slit-detector in retrospect, and, consequently recover the original interference pattern. In this sense, the complementarity between wave and particle behaviour was said to have been resolved. In Barad’s reading however: “[...] the original pattern is not recovered; rather a new interference pattern, one that takes a very different form is revealed [...]. In this regard it seems clear that the memory of events has not been erased, at least not in the usual sense of the terms “memory” and “erase”; on the contrary, in an important sense it seems evident that the observed phenomenon holds the memory of the fact that the which-path information was first determined and then made to be indeterminate once more through an appropriate modification of the apparatus” (Barad, 2007, p. 316). The outcome of the experiment does neither indicate the collapse nor resolution of the phenomena, and neither does it enable the simultaneous account of two initially complementary measurement intra-actions. Barad’s reading emphasizes the work of crafting apparatuses and knowledge inquiries that engage the difficult task of accounting for the historicity of matter. The experiment, in fact, exhibits the plastic quality of matter, in which past materializations extend, and are enfolded into, present materializations, which, themselves plastic, restrain and shape the possibility for future intra-actions. Thinking Malabou’s call for a minimal concept of essence with recourse to her notion of plasticity together with Barad, therefore, casts a perspective on crafting apparatuses which could enable a politics of possibilities and intra-actions deduced from embodied historicities of matter, potentially allowing for the changing of the possibility for change to become visible in measurement results.

## Conclusion

Barad’s agential realism does not only give us a feminist reconceptualization of agency, accountability, subjectivity and objectivity, but could also be thought to theoretically provide the

grounds for a feminist politics; this is because it would go beyond singular instances of marking to enable recognition of the recurrence of certain agential cuts as specific kinds of systemic violence as well as of the differences between locations. By way of such an apparatus — which remains hypothetical at the current moment with regard to the project of the humanities as well as politics — the location of a certain kind of feminist collective identity (thinking with Hinton) based on a minimal notion of female essence (as proposed by Malabou), together with the historicity of matter, becomes thinkable. Such an apparatus could, as always, be said to perform and participate in violence itself, as Peta Hinton warns us, calling the first movement of annunciative politics — the one of situating oneself — a “violent” one. Yet, whether or not we can differentiate normatively and/or ontologically between different kinds of violence, what, if not violent, can be the process of de- and trans-formation against what comes to be given and stabilized? Could we really think change of change and meaningful difference without what Malabou calls “disruption, negativity, adventure” (Malabou, 2008, p. 79) against and out of the given? Could we really think so, if we wish to refuse the contemporary prevalent “culture of amenity and docility” which leads us to remain endlessly flexible in the face of violent demands and impositions, “bowing our heads with a smile” (Malabou, 2008, p. 79).

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**ARTICLE****NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”**

# Cutting up the sensible

## Rancièrian politics in a posthumanist perspective

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**Abstract**

Ethics and politics in a new materialist framework are key issues in current debates and spark research in a wide array of fields from matters of sex and gender to ecology and art theory. However, a definition of politics, and how it relates to democracy, is often left out of these discussions. This article addresses that issue through the theory of radical democracy and politics as rupture from Jacques Rancière's writings and draws a comparison with Karen Barad's notions of indeterminacy and onto-epistemology. Whereas Rancière takes as his starting point the definition of democracy as equality, Barad interrogates the world in its onto-epistemological condition. By developing points of intersection between these two theoretical approaches, the problem of politics in new materialism is discussed and some initial steps to take Rancière's work into the field of ontology and epistemology are sketched out. The focus is on the relationship between the Baradian “cut” and Rancière's “distribution of the sensible” and on how both illuminate possibilities of emergence rather than accessibility. The article concludes by addressing politics as possibilities for change.

**Keywords**

politics, agential realism, Karen Barad, Jacques Rancière, posthumanism

*Repartir lo sensible**Política rancièriana desde una perspectiva posthumanista***Resumen**

*La ética y la política en un nuevo marco materialista son temas clave en los debates actuales y suscitan investigaciones en un amplio surtido de campos que van del sexo y el género a la ecología y la teoría artística. No obstante, la definición de la política y de cómo se vincula a la democracia suele dejarse fuera de estas discusiones. Este artículo encara esta cuestión a través de la teoría de la democracia radical y la política como ruptura, procedente de los escritos de Jacques Rancière, y establece una comparación con las nociones de indeterminación y onto-epistemología de Karen Barad. Mientras Rancière toma como punto de partida la definición de democracia como igualdad, Barad cuestiona la condición onto-epistemológica del mundo. Al desarrollar puntos de intersección entre estos dos enfoques teóricos, se debate el problema de la política en el nuevo materialismo y se plantean algunos primeros pasos para llevar la obra de Rancière hacia el terreno de la ontología y la epistemología. Concretamente, se establece una relación entre el «corte» de Barad y la «división de lo sensible» de Rancière, ya que ambos revelan posibilidades de emergencia más que de accesibilidad. El artículo concluye planteando la política como posibilidades de cambio.*

**Palabras clave**

*política, realismo agencial, Karen Barad, Jacques Rancière, posthumanismo*

The question of politics and ethics is a challenging one in a new materialist and posthumanist perspective, with these terms frequently invoked in matters of sex/gender, social responsibility and eco-critic debates. Yet these terms themselves are far less frequently interrogated. What is meant by politics and the political and what is the relationship with questions of ethics and responsibility? Today, we are far from understanding politics only as what regards the “polis” or the state or the government. In Judith Butler’s work, for instance, the question that appears to be repeatedly posed is “What does it mean to be a person, to be human or to be acknowledged as such” (Butler, 2001, p. 621). As Vikki Bell puts it, for Butler her political stance is her ethical stance, namely one of responsibility towards the other (Bell, 2008, p. 401).

In a response to “Anti-racism, multiculturalism and the ethics of identification” by Drucilla Cornell and Sara Murphy, Elizabeth Grosz urges us to shift our attention from what she terms identity politics to a “politics of imperceptibility”. Crudely put, instead of a politics of recognition and identity formation through the affirmation of others, we should ascribe to a politics of acts, of the impersonal, of forces. This gesture, she states, seeks to counterbalance the Hegelian strand of recognition that underpins a long tradition of thinking and wide array of feminist theory with a Nietzschean imprint, in which the being of becoming is central rather than the becoming of being. Grosz also emphasizes how forces are always in contestation, with each force seeking to expand and subdue, subvert or convert other forces (Grosz, 2002).

Crucially, this understanding involves a more dynamic concept of politics — one in which the human does not hold a privileged position (Grosz, 2002, p. 470). Thus, it calls attention to the challenge that a posthumanist understanding poses to many conceptions of politics, namely that the question of being human, and being recognized as such, is no longer adequate for defining politics. My aim with this article is to outline some preliminary convergences between the theories of Jacques Rancière and Karen Barad that I believe can be developed into a useful framework for thinking politics in a posthumanist perspective.

**The politics of matter**

Drawing on the theories on quantum indeterminacy of the physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962), Karen Barad develops an understanding of boundaries and properties as not inherent to an object but instead continually produced as effects of material-discursive practices. By observing the paradox that although light and matter will behave as waves in one experimental setup and as particles in another, they cannot simultaneously be both, Bohr concluded that things do not pre-exist measurement; rather, phenomena are the results of specific experimental setups. Thus, in this account, the apparatus — the method of measurement — is of crucial importance (Barad, 2007, p. 104-105, 118-119).

Barad expands Bohr’s findings by pointing to the limits of his realizations: the apparatus is itself a phenomenon and is to be

understood in much broader terms than just as the experimental setup in a laboratory: “*Apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices — specific material reconfigurings of the world — which come to matter*”. Phenomena are relations without pre-existing relata — the boundaries and properties of the components of the phenomenon are produced in what Barad terms the intra-action (Barad, 2007, p. 139).

To observe anything (and indeed to engage in any intra-action), it is necessary to enact a “cut” — a distance between the apparatus and the measured property of the phenomenon, that is, a cut between subject and object, between the observer and the observed. This cut, however, is contingent (not absolute, as in the Cartesian division between subject and object) and also enacts agential separability — the condition of exteriority within phenomena — and a causal structure among the components of the phenomenon (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Due to this causality, it makes possible a reproduction of the specific observation. This, therefore, as a localized version of knowledge and scientific objectivity, replaces an absolute version without falling into arbitrariness and without disabling the possibility of objectivity. However, it also implies that for anything to come into existence it has to partake in intra-actions in which cuts are enacted that produce boundaries. Centrally, then, the existence of something is constituted by its exclusions — everything cannot be at once, but must be enacted into being, and by choosing one option of measurement or intra-action, one will necessarily exclude a variety of others. In Barad’s posthumanist account, agency is not reserved for the human condition, and we are not the only ones who continually produces agential cuts. All of this can be performed by everything, including “dead” matter (Barad, 2012, p. 32). Indeed, the boundary between human and non-human, living and dead, is itself a boundary that, like all boundaries, has to be drawn and redrawn continually.

We are not confronted by this wave-particle paradox in our daily, “macroscopic” lives. Indeed, Bohr’s theories of indeterminacy have been largely overlooked by classical physics for the better part of a century (Barad, 2012, p. 385). However, according to Barad, the complementarity exists everywhere, but material-discursive practices function iteratively to generate what we experience as a relative stability. Matter, including ourselves, again and again performs causal intra-actions, and again and again produces phenomena, thus producing and reproducing the world in its becoming (Barad, 2012, p. 393).

I want to pay special attention here to the notion of the cut and to emphasize that, within this theory, the cut is not only a necessary condition for causality and scientific objectivity — it is simply unavoidable. We cannot not make cuts. It is not a bias but an ontic condition. In everything we do we intra-act, constitute boundaries and draw lines between subject and object. But it is equally important to highlight the contingencies of cuts. The computer that I am using for this article can be both part of the subject, the apparatus, when I use

it to write my paper, or it can be the object of my actions if I choose to move it from one spot to another. It is never a determinately part of either subject or object, but can only be that within an intra-action, as part of a phenomenon.

The order of the world as such is therefore in continual production: it is constantly done and redone. From a different perspective, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière arrives at a similar conception. He, however, builds his theory around the notions of democracy and entitlements, with a rather rigorous definition of politics.

As his point of departure Rancière takes Plato’s musings on seven entitlements to rule, among them age, birth and wealth, but also one he ironically calls “God’s part”. It is the lot of fate or chance — what Rancière understands as democracy in a radical sense (Rancière, 2004, p. 5). In this polemical stance, democracy is the scandalous “power of the people with nothing, the speech of those who should not be speaking, those who were not really speaking beings” (Rancière, 2004). Thus, the radical condition of democracy is founded on a principle of initial equality between everyone (or everything, one might add). There is, therefore, no rightful entitlement to rule.

However, according to Rancière, this also founds a paradox. In Aristotle’s formulation of the citizen, it is a being that is at once the agent of an action and the matter which that action is exercised upon. This contradicts the conventional logic of action in which an agent possesses a specific capacity for producing an effect on an object, which, in turn, is apt for receiving that effect (Rancière, 2010, p. 29). Indeed, to act means to initiate, as in the Greek word *arkheir*: to begin, to lead and eventually to rule. If one is leading, then there must be those who are led (Rancière, 2010, p. 29-30). Keeping Barad’s agential realism in mind might be helpful here, as temporary subject-object relations are continually constituted through “cuts”. However, that is in contradiction with the notion of radical democracy in which everyone rules at the same time. Within the anarchic situation of this democracy, an order will always be established; in any ruling or action, in general, someone (or something) will eventually lead.

Interestingly, in the Rancièrian understanding, the exercise of the *arkhê*, the ruling, is closely connected to what is sensible, that is, visible, audible, sayable and so on. He calls this ruling order the *police*, which is a specific “distribution of the sensible”. It is not to be equated with actual police as we initially understand it, but should be understood as a symbolic constitution of the social which allows some things to appear and make others invisible. Crucially, this order does not allow for a supplement or void, it claims to “count all the parts” of a society (Rancière, 2010, p. 36). The distribution of the sensible is also one that ties modes of being and doing to specific groups or groupings and, at the same time, makes this order seem natural, normal and just. The police is business as usual: in Baradian terminology, it corresponds to the practice of constituting boundaries as though they were natural or inherent to an object or a group (such as sex, race or class).

The paradoxical situation of democracy is itself what makes politics possible, as understood by Rancière. Politics is a rupture in the logic of the police, an interruption in which the contingency of this “normal” logic is pointed out; at the same time politics breaks with the idea of the possibility of just distribution, and thus draws attention to the basic lack of entitlement that characterizes democracy. Centrally, Rancière points out that the political subject comes into being only through this action and, furthermore, that political action cannot be equated with the exercise of power (Rancière, 2010, p. 27).

Essentially, Rancière’s conception of politics is one of the disruption and breaking of a specific logic. He uses the term *dissensus* to designate this process, namely that of shifting the current distribution of the sensible and bringing new subjects into visibility and speakability. An interesting point in his work is the division between the domestic and the public spheres. Central to the existence of Aristotle’s political being (which is human, but is definitely not all humans) is the capability of *logos*, speech. Categories excluded from this order, for instance women, slaves, animals, are only able to express noises, cries of pleasure or displeasure. The domestic sphere is thus one from which no *logos* can emerge, and to relegate beings to this space effectively means dismissing them from the ruling order. The political aspect of these categories lies in qualifying their spaces as places in a community from which understandable discourse can emerge.

An equivalent to Barad’s attention to matter’s performativity is not present in Rancière’s work, which takes as its starting point ancient writings on politics. Where Barad speaks of onto-epistemological conditions, Rancière focuses on interrogations of definitions of what constitutes the common, being undeniably more attentive to the specific human agents entailed. Nonetheless, Barad’s and Rancière’s conceptions of visibility, or sensibility, of the world do converge to a large degree. Things and groups have to be brought into existence (Barad) or sensibility (Rancière). They do not pre-exist the actions, although there is a difference at the level of ontology here. Jane Bennet has further argued that, despite Rancière’s own reluctance to think of politics as something which can include the nonhuman, it could be possible to do so (Bennet, 2010, p. 106-108). This engenders the possibility to think of politics in terms of impersonal forces instead of identity and recognition.

Using the discussion of sex determination as an example, there is thus an essentially political imprint in the feminist interrogation of scientific practices. The studies by Anne Fausto-Sterling on intersex persons and the existence of multiple sexes instead of only two<sup>1</sup> profoundly rework the distribution in which there are only two valid categories — a distribution that claims to be objective, natural and exhaustive. Likewise, the work of Cheryl Chase in favor of intersex people’s rights, demanding that they themselves get the choice in

determining (or not determining) what sex they are or want to be, qualifies the voices of people to make decisions regarding their body, rather than be subjected to “expert” opinions in infancy and be surgically assigned a sex within the male-female binary (Chase, 1998, Rosario, 2009). Although this is taking Rancière’s theory somewhat far away from the realm in which he writes, one might indeed say that an experiment that shows matter (traditionally understood as particles) to exhibit wave behavior could be seen to have political aspects. By opening up a new field of the sensible, it makes visible that which, until then, had no reason to be seen and also disrupts the logic and demands a profound reworking of notions of being and becoming.

## Ethics and consensus

If politics is a *dissensual* activity, Rancière goes on to designate *consensus* as being established by the police and as effacing the litigious character of politics. Consensus is not, then, the peaceful and respectful discussion and agreement among parties but, instead, an erasure of the fact of disagreement and of the contingency of the current order and its constitutive outside. Further on, Rancière somewhat polemically uses the abstraction of consensus to analyze ethics, or what he calls the ethical turn of politics and aesthetics.

In Rancière’s terminology, ethics consists in equating between modes of being and modes of doing and making norms appear as facts, which is, essentially, the restoration of the order of the police and the denial of the contingency and possibility of a supplement. Rancière understands the word *ethos* in the following way:

Before signifying a norm or morality, the word *ethos* signifies two things: both the dwelling and the way of being, or lifestyle, that corresponds to this dwelling. Ethics, then, is the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action. (Rancière, 2010, p. 184)

Lyotard’s writings on the “other” is an example of this ethical turn; according to Rancière, Lyotard ascribes to a subjection to the law of the other as something radically other, unmasterable and impossible to understand or respond to (Rancière, 2010, p. 191-192). Comparing this to Barad’s notion of ethics as responsibility — as derived from Emmanuel Levinas — there are two things worth noting: in her understanding, ethics needs not be founded on stable (id)entities, and the other is always entangled, never radically outside. Barad, then, following Levinas, sees ethics as a condition of being in the world: it is not subsequent to action as a rumination on morals and values, but a central part of existence itself. Thus, she adds it as yet another

1. See, for instance, Fausto-Sterling, 1993 and 2000.

component to her worldview in the term ethico-onto-epistemology. Ethics is always a central part of knowing and doing; we cannot escape it, nor should we try. “Ethics grounds human experience (not the other way around)” (Barad, 2007, p. 391):

What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us — agential separability is not individuation. Ethics is therefore not about the right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part. (Barad, 2007, p. 393)

The proximity of the other, and not a radical alterity, thus forms the basis of this ethical understanding; we are always entangled and differences are temporary and contingent — the products of differential intra-actions and not inherent properties. The ethical consists of accounting for our intra-actions, paying attention to the effects of the cuts we make.

Even the smallest cuts matter, and therefore Barad locates responsibility in a full accounting of the apparatuses and practices that produce specific phenomena, including what is excluded (Barad, 2007, p. 390-391). Here, with Rancière, one might contrast this notion of a full accounting with the idea that no such thing can exist. It can never be exhaustive and by definition we cannot know what did not come to be or to be seen. Rancière’s view stresses the possibility of politics and attentiveness to the quarrel over the sensible itself by stating that an order exists only to the exclusion of others, which indeed is in line with Barad’s theory. Making space for the political does not entail rejoicing in a state of consensus, but being open to a multiplicity of new things.

In bringing these two views together I am neither trying to conflate them, nor to privilege one over the other. On the contrary, I wish to initiate a dialogue — to read diffractively, one might say. Rancière’s theory can be expanded with Barad’s notion of onto-epistemology tied up with questions of physics and materiality and attentive to material constraints and matter’s performativity. Likewise, Rancière’s notion of politics as rupture seems a useful supplement to Barad’s ethics, in that it provides a rigorous conception of politics that does not ascribe it with qualities of identity and does not demand a pre-emptive understanding of what exists. It inquires into specific possibilities for change in the way it stresses cuts that are new to the current order or logic: it makes new subjects appear and engenders new modes of visibility and sensibility. For Rancière, politics is not simply something

which matters or is important. Politics is essentially a term designated to describe possibilities and processes of change, in which there are dynamic relations between the inside and outside of the symbolic order of the police. As Rancière states, the promise of change lies in the fact that “politics is a local, precarious, contingent activity — an activity which is always on the point of disappearing, and thus perhaps also on the point of reappearing” (Rancière, 2004, p. 8).

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